The Daring Loot

(First Edition)

by

Tian Wu

For those who seek the truth, no matter the cost.

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Preface

Oʻahu, Hawaii — Friday, October 11th, 2030

The first wave began on a sunny Friday, without any sign.

An ancient pathogen, the "*Ice Flu*", was allegedly to have leaked from an Antarctic ice core sample during an experiment.

Soon, coughing started and fever spiked — a cold, unnatural burn that turned eyes glassy and skins pale as frost. Within a few days, the infected ones lost all consciousness and became walking-dead. All that remained was a primal, ravenous hunger.

Over a national broadcast on the next Sunday (October 20th, 2030), the governor of Hawaii and CDC officials declared a state of emergency due to a contagious and highly lethal virus detected on the island of Oʻahu. Local citizens and tourists were advised to remain indoors until further notice. The media spun a tale of an ancient virus, escaped from an Antarctic ice core study in the labs of the University of Hawaii.

The government reacted with chilling efficiency. A naval blockade quickly sealed the island. Live ammunition were fired upon those who attempted to flee the island. The world mourned, then forgot, and moved on. The island of Oʻahu was completely erased from the maps.

Chapter I

Dawn of the Loot

Off the coast of Honolulu Harbor — Sunday, July 1st, 2046

Sixteen years have passed since the island of Oʻahu was sealed in a naval blockade and erased from the maps.

The sea was the color of slate, the sky just bleeding into light. Contestant Kevin Bundy stood at the railing of the chartered ferry, his knuckles white where they gripped the metal. The wind carried the smell of salt and decay.

Behind him, the crew of *The Daring Loot* moved like ghosts, adjusting the micro-cameras on his tactical jacket. The fabric was sleek, black, embedded with microchips and signal boosters connecting the live camera feeds to the studio via satellites. Every breath, every glance, will be broadcast to millions of audience.

"Nervous?" a voice asked.

Susan Bing, Kevin's partner contestant, leaned against the bulkhead with her arms crossed. She wore the same camera-lined tactical jacket,

but on her it looked like a costume. Her face was sharp, intelligent, eyes scanning the approaching shoreline with the detached curiosity of a programmer debugging codes.

"I don't like being watched," Kevin said, his voice low.

"Too late for that." Susan nodded toward the drone hovering silently overhead, its red recording light stared at them like a steady unblinking eye.

Kevin was an ex–Navy SEAL soldier, built like a bulldozer, with a tactical mind that saw threats in shadows. Susan had been a Silicon Valley computer programmer until the AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) model she helped build replaced her. She had sold everything to pay the $30,000 entry fee. This was her last roll of the dice.

A producer with a headset approached, smiling widely. "Final briefing, folks. You've got your truck, your rifles and pistols, seven days worth of rations, med-kits, survival kits, and all the other little gadgets. The rules are simple: loot anything of value, load them into your vehicle, survive until exfil on Saturday at noon. Bare in mind, there is a kill-free peace period lasting until the first midnight. Afterwards, you can raid other teams and kill other contestants, but do not hurt your teammate or you will be disqualified. Oh, and here..."

He handed each of them a metallic card in the size of a social security card, slick and cool . "One supply drop for each team, you may order anything under ten grand market value. But only one type of item is allowed for each card, you can't even order Pepsi and Coca-cola simultaneously with the same card, so use it wisely. Also, please allow 12 hours of delivery time, don't save it until the last day."

"Also remember," the producer added, "watch where you are going, do not get outside the designated loot zone, which updates daily on your smart wristband. Exiting the loot zone will not only get you disqualified,

you will also be marked as fugitives, any other team may pledge half of their current loot for a temporary permission to exit the loot zone and hunt you down for bounty rewards."

The chartered ferry docked at the Ala Moana beach with a groan of rusted metal. The island lay before the contestants, like a giant corpse overgrown with jungle. Skyscrapers stood like broken teeth against the pinkening sky.

At noon (Pacific Daylight Time) on Sunday, a brand new season of *The Daring Loot* officially started airing. As the cameras started rolling in the television studio at the ABN[1] headquarter in Seattle, the host's voice boomed from monitors and screens all across the nation: "Good day, fellow looters! Welcome to Season 5 of America's No.1 reality show — *The Daring Loot*!!! Live from ABN Entertainments in Seattle, I'm your favorite host..." The host paused his voice and pointed his mic to the audience, he put his palm by his left ear pointing towards the audience. And the audience yelled back the host's name passionately: "J.C. Rayner!"

Rayner the host continued his opening line: "In this blood-boiling saga, twenty-four desperate looters from all around America venture into the deserted corners of civilization, seeking treasures that were left behind long ago. This season's playground..." He paused again for dramatic effects and stared at the audience with a cheeky smile, "is the forbidden island of Oʻahu! Twelve teams of two will land on the Ala Moana beach shortly, our twenty-four contestants will complete within a dynamic loot zone that shifts its boundary daily to keep them on the move. They must collect loot on the way, as valuable as possible, protect their loot from other contestants and survive till exfil on Saturday at noon. Loot, fight, exfil, simple as that. Bare in mind, only what you can take out matters. Those teams that successfully exfil in the end will be ranked by

[1]A fictional television network in this novel, see Figure VII.1 for its logo.

their raw rewards[2]. The dividend scale of final rewards is as follows, try not to trigger the deductions." Rayner points to a holographic image on the stage next to him:

Team Rank	Share of Rewards	Deductions
1	120% LV + 90% B + 60% T	• Equips damaged/lost: −100% repair/replace cost; • Teammate eliminated: −50% all rewards;
2, 3	90% LV + 60% B + 30% T	
4, 5, 6	60% LV + 30% B + 0% T	
7 - 12	0% LV + 0% B + 0% T	

Table I.1: Dividend scale of final rewards (ranked by raw rewards).

"The top three teams will also be rewarded with our customized loot trophies[3], while the last six teams will get nothing from this adventure. And don't forget, besides the loot, there's also bonus money rewarded to teams that accomplish these goals." Rayner added as he points to another holographic image on the other side of the stage next to him:

Bonus Goals	Bonus Rewards
First kill-shot	$4800 (first kill-shot only)
Kill-shots (after first one)	$2400 per confirmed kill
Bounty of fugitives	$18000 × Day # per fugitive killed
Ultimate slayers (most kill-shots among all teams)	$24000 per team
Champion Duel	$36000 per winning team

Table I.2: Scale of Bonus rewards.

"Similar to previous seasons, contestants can earn a great deal in the 'Champion Duel' by defeating the tactical combat droid, aka[4] 'the

[2]Raw Rewards = Raw Loot's Value (LV) + Raw Bonus (B) + Raw Tipping (T).
[3]See Figures VII.2, VII.3, and VII.4.
[4]Abbreviation for "also known as".

TCD', which is remotely operated by last season's champion — Greg 'Massacre' Thompson!" Rayner proudly introduced the sole champion from Season 4 of *The Daring Loot*, while the audience cheered loudly as this muscular gladiator's image appeared on the giant screen behind Rayner.

Rayner then speaks to the fanatical contestants: "Now let's meet the contestants of this season."

The camera switched to the chartered ferry at Honolulu Harbor, capturing the twenty-four contestants warming up for this thrilling adventure.

"Let's see, a pair of ex–cons, a couple of newly-weds desperate for cash, two thrill-seeking influencers, and a brother-sister duo hosting a survivalist YouTube channel, as well as several randomly-paired teams." Rayner added.

As Rayner spoke, a holographic list of teams and contestants simultaneously showed up in the studio stage and on the audience's screens:

Team #	Contestants	Team #	Contestants
1	T. Moore & G. Smith	2	H. Lee & M. Padrov
3*	A. Gordon & J. Gordon	4*	D. Kim & E. Batalha
5	N. Cortes & V. Martinez	6	S. Bing & K. Bundy
7*	C. Ochoa & X. Chan	8*	B. Levy & W. Rocklin
9	F. Barone & Z. Clebsch	10*	O. Swinton & R. Louisville
11	P. Andrew & U. Colvin	12	Y. Kobayashi & L. Taylor

Table I.3: List of Season 5 contestants (randomly numbered, not alphabetically ordered). The asterisks on team # denote the self-paired teams, and all the other teams were randomly paired by the show's crew.

When the clock reached 01:00 pm in the TV studio (10:00 am in Honolulu), the passionate theme song of *The Daring Loot* went on as Rayner counted down with the audience at the studio: "Alright, ladies and gentlemen, the time has come! 10! 9! 8! 7! 6! 5! 4! 3! 2! 1! And the loot begins!!! Good luck and happy hunting!!!"

As the front ramp of the chartered ferry lowers onto the golden sand of the beach, 12 teams of contestants disembarked with ebullient vigor. Under the sunny tropical sky, the sea breezes gently touched their faces. The audience watched the contestants go like a blitz, all hungry for money, and all bloody dangerous.

Kevin & Susan climbed into their modified Fort F-160 Raptor truck, its bed empty and waiting for loot. Kevin took the wheel, and engines roared to life. Some teams sped off toward the luxury hotels of Waikīkī, others towards the financial district, the high-end shopping malls, the banks, etc — places where cash and costly jewels might still be found. As they drove into the corpse of Honolulu, the cameras watched.

"And off they go! Thanks to our sponsor Fort Motor Company, this season's contestants will have 960 horsepower and 800 lb-ft of torque boost to aid their adventure. The latest Fort F-160 Raptor truck is an HEV[5] with a 5.2L Supercharged V8 engine and aerospace grade solar-panels, now at a historically low price of $119999 with tax." Rayner had to do this for the benefit of the show.

Back to the island of O'ahu, Susan was sitting anxiously on the front passenger seat. She looked at Kevin and asked with wonder: "Hey K, where are we going?"

[5]Abbreviation for "Hybrid Electric Vehicle".

Kevin pulled out the holographic map[6] on his smart wristband, he browsed around the designated loot zone and tapped his finger at a location inland. "Here, the University of Hawaii."

"Why the university? Why not just go straight to some bank?" Susan asked with doubt on her face.

"Everyone else is thinking short-term, looting cash, jewels, or other stuff that are obviously expensive. But the real deal here is to survive till exfil. None of those shit matters if we can't get out with them. So let's avoid contact, and loot somewhere less crowded. What do you say?" Kevin explained calmly.

Susan nodded slowly, but she still had some worries: "Okay, I agree with the 'avoid contact' part, but don't you think it's a bit foolish to visit the origin of the ice flu?"

"The closer we are to danger, the farther we are from harm." Kevin tried to ease the mood by joking with a misplaced quote by Pippin from *The Lord of the Rings*.

"It's been sixteen years, the virus is long gone. They kept this island sealed for something else hidden here. Besides, I'm a local here. Trust me, I know the way around this island." Kevin added with full confidence, attempting to clear Susan's doubt (partially, at least) again.

"Alright, but there better be something worth looting at the U. And please don't bet our lives on some stupid quotes." Susan convinced herself to trust Kevin's reasoning, after all, she doesn't want to argue too much with the ex-Navy SEAL on Day 1.

Meanwhile, back at the ABN studio, the show host J.C. Rayner continued his introduction of this brand new season of *The Daring Loot*. Rayner proudly introduced the mysterious guests with his iconic voice:

[6] See Figure VII.5 for the detailed route of the protagonists during their loot.

"As the contestants rushing eagerly towards their loot during this precious kill-free peace period, let's give a big round of applause to our honored guests slash co-hosts of this season — 'the Wise brothers'!!!"

The audience crazed and hoorayed as the Wise brothers walked onto the stage by this cue, with smokes and flare effects popping up on both sides of the stage. "The mysterious two-time successive champions of Season 2 and Season 3!!! But this time, we get to see their faces without those masks!" Rayner rambles on as the Wise brothers posed their textbook victory move with their iconic face masks off (still hanging on their necks, actually). Some audience were shocked when they saw the appalling scars on the Wise brothers' faces for the first time, others wondered what happened to them that left those scars.

The Wise brothers shook hands with Rayner and greeted the audience. They seated in the guest chairs next to Rayner's host chair. The camera pointed at their scarred by still smiley faces, and the crowd quiets down from the applause. "Welcome back to our show, folks. Without guns this time, hopefully." Rayner opened the dialogue with a little joke.

"So last season, we saw your stunning performance as the defending champions in the duel, and only one contestant defeated you in that duel, Greg 'Massacre' Thompson, who was the final winner of Season 4 and this year's defending champion of the duel. So, would you care to share some advice with Mr. Thompson?" Rayner asked.

"Well the TCD[7] is pretty bulky, so you can't operate it too swiftly, because it won't react as fast as your moves. The key is to use the bulkiness of the bot and hold your balance." said Jay Wise, the older one of the Wise brothers.

"I believe the rules of the duel is still the same as before, right?" asked Ed Wise, the younger one of the Wise brothers. "If the TCD falls down,

[7]Abbreviation for "Tactical Combat Droid".

that's almost a definite win for the challenging contestants. So you must maintain balance while keeping an extra eye on your crotch area, because that's most vulnerable part of the bot and the contestants may tackle you down from there."Ed continued his advice for Mr. Thompson.

"Like that scene from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, where Luke tripped over the imperial walkers with a tether." Jay added.

"Huh huh, exactly, thank you for the vivid picture. And yes, the rules of the duel is still the same: 'No firearms allowed, contestants may use any cold tools they can find and their vehicles to tackle down the TCD.' After the peace period ends by the first midnight, contestants may duel with the TCD as a team, retrieve its power core after defeating it, and only with the power core can you cash the bonus rewards after exfil. Other teams may intervene or interfere during your duel, but no contestant is allowed to enter the perimeter of the duel during the peace period and also not within six hours after the TCD has been defeated, because our maintenance crew need that time to repair the TCD for future duels. The duel rewards will be counted towards others if they raided your power core, even though they did not win the duel by themselves. Also remember that, this is for you, my dear contestants, you can get killed on this show, and you may kill others if you must, without legal responsibilities. Anything happened during the show stays in the show, these are all in the contract that you signed before departing for the loot." Rayner explained the rules of *The Daring Loot* once again, both to the audience and to the contestants[8], in the same way as he has done for the previous four seasons.

After a bit of chitchat, the camera went back to the O'ahu island. Meanwhile, inside the ABN studio, Rayner, the Wise brothers, and the audi-

[8]The contestants can receive live announcements from the crew of *The Daring Loot* via their car screens, smart wristbands, and headsets.

ence all looked up to the big screen on the stage, where the GPS signals of two contestants appeared on the screen. It was Kevin & Susan.

"Now back to Honolulu, finally we have some movements worth chasing. As you can see here on the big screen, contestants Kevin Bundy and Susan Bing of Team #6 have entered the Mānoa campus of the University of Hawaii, and they are approaching the current boundary of our dynamic loot zone. I'm not sure what are these two nerds looking for in a deserted schoolyard, however, if they cross the borderline, they will be disqualified for further competition but still have to stay on the island till exfil. And as usual, if you miss the exfil, you will have to find your own way home, no one will come to pick you up after the exfil window closes." Rayner narrated, and then Jay commented on the new rules of this season: "Besides that, there is a new rule added to this season, which is that a bounty will be put on the lives of disqualified contestants, aka 'the fugitives'. The positions of the fugitives will be shared with all qualifying contestants on their smart wristbands, and the bounty on their heads multiplies everyday as the loot goes on."

"Thanks for bringing that up, Jay. This bounty hunting rule allows qualifying contestants to hunt the fugitives outside the loot zone without being punished, with the premise of pledging half of their current loot. In addition, anything you loot outside the zone during a bounty hunt will not be counted towards your final rewards unless they belonged to the fugitives which you eliminated." Rayner added with specific details.

As the narrators spoke in the studio, two camera drones were heading towards Kevin & Susan's position for some close-up footage of their movements. Meanwhile, other teams were also being following by several camera drones, staring at their movements and waiting for a fat-loot moment.

Chapter II

Darkness under the Sun

University of Hawaii at Mānoa — Sunday, July 1st, 2046

At noon (Honolulu local time) on Day 1, Kevin & Susan arrived at the Mānoa campus of the University of Hawaii. They parked their truck on the fifth floor (roof) of the main parking structure next the Law School building, laid out their solar panels, then they covered the rest of their truck with plants and random pieces of trash they found in the surrounding as camouflage.

They geared up and walked into the Mānoa campus with fully-loaded AR-15's. The campus was a cathedral of ruins. Vines strangled concrete, lecture halls were dark, windows blown out, with the chirping of insects echoing across the empty hallways. Papers and posters were bleached by years of sunlight and rain water, fluttered across overgrown quads like ghosts.

First, they crossed an outdoor theatre, where the cement seats are now covered by a layer of moss. Then they crossed the student service center, and entered the recreation center.

Inside those deserted buildings, the air was thick with dust and deadly silence. Old equipments, broken glasses, rotten vegetation and trash scattered all over the floor, filled with the moldy smell of decay and death.

"Where do we start the loot? By night fall we won't be save anymore." Susan asked with a bit of panic.

"Who said we are safe right now?" Kevin turned around and asked rhetorically. "But don't panic yet, we parked far enough and hid it well."

While they chattered, a camera drone flew inside the building, it followed behind them and turned on the fill light. Kevin & Susan were spooked a little at first, but they soon got used to the presence of the drone.

Kevin walked up to an old folded map on the side wall of a hall way, he gently stretched the stained map and pointed his flashlight at it. The drone also pointed its camera light at the map and zoomed in for a close-up footage.

"Our college folks Bundy and Bing are looking at the map, seems like they're gonna go even deeper into the campus, which would put them dangerously close to the northeast boundary of the loot zone." Ed commented in the studio as Kevin pointed his finger on the map: "Here, the bio-med building, must be tons of valuable equipments in there. Let's get a cart of some kind and load those small sciency gadgets from the labs."

"Won't there be remaining pathogens left in the labs?" Susan doubted.

"If there's any, that survived 16 years on its own, it would worth a fortune." Kevin joked in a calming tone.

"Relax, what ever happens, you got an ex-Navy SEAL to cover you." Kevin added while he grabbed a handcart from the lobby of the recreation center, supposedly to have been used for moving fitness weights in the past.

As Kevin & Susan walked outside again into the dazzling tropical sunshine, the first camera drone followed behind like a creepy stalker, and a second drone hovered high above them, offering a different view of their movements.

"Heads up, in this season there's no physical marking at the loot zone boundary any more, so you have to pay close attention to the GPS on your smart wristband as you approach the border. Now let's see if the BnB's[1] would be the first ones to cross the borderline and be wanted." Rayner commented with his passionate voice, and then he brought up another profiting segment of this reality show: "Dear looters, our official tipping channel is now open, if you want to place a bet, or simply wish to support someone on the loot, just scan the QR code below with your cell phone or open your browser and visit our official website ABNnetwork.com/TheDaringLoot/tipping. On this same webpage, we will also distribute a total amount of one million dollars of e-cash per confirmed kill-shot to all audience who has bet or tipped. You only need to give one dollar on each day for the least to participate in the random cash-draws this season."

Since Rayner has spoken, live bet-pools of various betting events went online, including but not limited to:

- Which contestant will be the first to get killed?

- Which contestant will be the first to kill another contestant?

[1]The protagonists' last names both start with the letter "B", hence the narrator quoted the famous abbreviation for "Bed and Breakfast" to call the protagonists' team as a teasing nickname.

- Which team will be the first to get disqualified?

- Which team will be the first to win the Champion Duel?

- Which team(s) will be eliminated during the Champion Duel?

- Which team will be the first to get raided?

- Which team will be the champion (first place) of this season?

- Which team will be the second place of this season?

- Which team will be the third place of this season?

The audience swarmed in, trying to earn fat cash in the bet, their heavy traffic almost crippled the official website of *The Daring Loot*. Meanwhile, rough estimates of each team's raw rewards and raw loot values were updated and displayed live on the show.

After a round of crazy bet-placing while Kevin & Susan walked across the ruined campus, they entered the building of biomedical sciences at the northeast corner of the Mānoa campus. Kevin pushed the dusty main gate of the building, making a loud scratching noise with the asked floor. Having been left unattended under the scorching tropical sun, the outer walls and glass of the building had become fragile and hazy. Inside the building, molds flourished in the dark corridors where no light has shone upon in over a decade.

Kevin turned on the flashlight attached to his AR-15 and waved at Susan: "Su, fall behind and watch my six."

"What?" Susan was a bit confused by Kevin's words.

"Sorry, that's military talk for 'follow closely behind me and watch my back'." Kevin clarified with a lowered whispering voice.

"Why are we whispering? I thought you said nobody would come here." Susan wondered with a tad of fear.

"Just being cautious, recon first, then loot stuff." Kevin whispered again, but this time raised his voice just a little bit louder than last time.

They slowly approached the stairwell on the west wing of the building, Kevin pointed his AR-15 at the fire door with his facial muscles so taut that sweats dropped from his forehead, as if there's something ominous on the other side of the fire door.

Kevin readjusted himself, trying his best to hide his unexplained fear. Suddenly, Kevin kicked the fire door open, a loud noise echoed all over the stairwell as aged ashes and dust fell from above due to this sudden disturbance. A human skull also fell from out of nowhere and smashed in front of Kevin & Susan.

The noise and the skull spooked Susan, she screamed once with a high pitch out of natural instinct, but soon silenced herself to adhere to Kevin's previous order of keeping quiet.

"Whoops, went too hard on the door, my bad." Kevin whispered an apology to calm her down.

Kevin crouched down and checked the broken human skull with his flashlight. The skull seemed greener than normal human skulls, with some sort of dried fungi filaments left in the unusual tiny pores on top of the head.

Kevin didn't stay for too long, he stood up soon and climbed upstairs back to back with Susan, while Susan dragged the handcart upstairs with one hand and pointed her rifle to the back with her other hand. A few minutes later, they came to the fourth floor of the main research complex, with a camera drone following behind them.

Kevin kicked on a fire door again, but this time he acknowledged Susan in advance. Bang! This fire door didn't hold well and fell on the floor. After the dust and ashes cleared out, Kevin & Susan walked in cautiously. They shone their flashlights upon each door and window as they pass through the hallway, checking for any danger and also looking for valuable loot inside.

"This floor is all clear, let's grab some loot and move on. Small gadgets only, nothing big and heavy." Kevin said with his commander-like voice.

Then Kevin knocked the window on a lab door with his gunstock, stuck his arm inside and opened the squeaking door that was magnetically locked. As Kevin started loading a centrifuge into the handcart, Susan stopped him: "These are still too large to carry, and they're too old to worth a lot. Let's dismantle them apart and take the key parts only."

"Yeah, good idea." Kevin nodded while wiping the sweat off his forehead.

"Back to the BnB's, seems like they are tearing those lab equipments apart." Jay commented live in the studio.

"They're taking the key parts with rare elements, saving room and keeping most of the values, very clever." Rayner added on the show.

They looted those labs one by one, disassembled sterilizers, centrifuges, microscopes, PCR machines, mass spectrophotometer, hematology analyzers, as well as a few old laptops and tablets that were left behind, etc. They smashed these lab equipments covered in thick layers of dust and spider webs, and only retrieved the key components that contained rare-earth elements.

After finishing looting the fourth floor, Kevin & Susan wanted to continue their loot upstairs. They covered their handcart with a large piece of ripstop nylon cloth they found in one of the labs, tied it up to the

handcart and tightened the tethers. Then Kevin & Susan moved the handcart upstairs together.

However, this time, they let their guard down when they climbed upstairs. This was a big mistake.

"They are not satisfied with their loot yet, they are heading upstairs to loot more." Ed commented live in the studio.

"But they seemed to be unaware of what's on the fifth floor. According to an old map from 2029, the fifth floor of that building used to be a storage facility of lethal biochemical samples. Will Bing & Bundy become the first contestants to be eliminated by environmental elements? Let's wait and see." Rayner added again to raise the audience's attention and curiosity.

As Kevin & Susan made it to the fifth floor, they put their handcart down on the ground and panted for a moment. When Kevin turned around, he immediately saw that the fifth floor fire door was wide open and one of the door hinges was loosened, with a scarlet biohazard symbol ☣ and large boldfaced warning texts "**RESTRICTED AREA : AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**" on the door. With blood palm prints painted all over the door, Susan was spooked again with she looked up, but this time she didn't scream out loud.

Nevertheless, the two looters still marched inwards. Suddenly, a loud disordering noise came from the other end of the dark corridor. The noise didn't sound like natural disturbance, such as a wind blowing something off. In fact, there is no window at all on this floor, it is completely concrete-sealed due to its specific function.

Kevin & Susan immediately raised their rifles, aiming at the dark abyss that is the corridor. Both of them started to tremble and burst cold sweat, especially Kevin.

"It's wind, right? I saw the elevator shaft was open, that's just wind flowing from there, right?" Susan muttered and looked at Kevin with sincere fear in her watery brown eyes, trying to comfort herself.

Susan looked at Kevin, seeking for consolation and protection from this G.I. Joe. However, Kevin stood still, flashbacks swarmed into his head. He'd felt this utterly fear before — in Iran, in Sudan, and in Ukraine. The noise did not last long, it was like a one-time thing, a coincidence of some sort. Susan convinced herself that it was just wind, but Kevin felt there would be more: "Stay sharp, I don't think that was wind, or rats."

Dead silence was restored, but it was the silence before ambush. Kevin slowly moved forward, step by step, point his gun to the front and ready to fire. He waved at Susan, signaling her to stay back a little and mind their behind.

Kevin turned right at the middle of the corridor and entered a one of the storage rooms. He flashed his rifle and flashlight all over the place to check for anything that moves.

Still dead silence. Kevin waved at Susan to come closer and loot the storage room. The room is filled with several rows of large cold-storage units (laboratory refrigerators), with loads of specimen tubes and petri dishes inside. There's no visible samples or specimens left in the refrigerators, only some stains that might have been left by the lethal pathogens that were once stored here.

Susan peeked inside one of the refrigerators. She saw several vials resting in a nest of racks, each labeled with a biohazard symbol ☣ and the texts "**ONYX — STRAIN J-117**".

"Doesn't look like there's much to loot. And please don't open these cabinets!" Susan informed Kevin as she pointed towards the vials in the refrigerators.

Kevin didn't respond, he continued to sweep around the room, as if he knew what to look for.

"Where's the camera drone, I thought they're supposed to following us all the time." Susan muttered again.

"I saw it left through the elevator shaft, probably because the thick metal walls here would block its signal." Kevin answered her.

While Susan was wandering around the room, Kevin stopped at a terminal console at the corner of the storage room. With the power long gone, they certainly cannot operate it. Just when Kevin is thinking, he noticed there's something under the console desk. It was an opened safe.

Kevin checked the safe with his flashlight, he saw a rectangular metallic object lying inside the safe.

"Su, come over here." Kevin called Susan to help him. "Take the light for me."

Kevin knelt down on the floor, reached into the safe with his hand and grabbed the metal block. Kevin brought the metal block out, he blew the dust away as Susan pointed her flashlight at the metal block. It was a hardened, military-grade, wireless external hard drive[2], with the seal of the U.S. Department of Defense on it and the word "**CLASSIFIED**" under the seal.

"Jackpot!" Kevin said with a bit of relief in his tone.

"A hard drive?" Susan took a peek at it. "Hmm, I doubt there's much value in that."

[2] See Figure VII.7.

Kevin then flipped the hard drive over and showed Susan the seal and the "**CLASSIFIED**" text: "Whatever is in this, they'll pay a fortune to recover it."

"Who will pay? The show only pays based on market value." Susan argued again with doubts.

"The federal government, Su. They have a system of recovering lost classified intel, paying people off is the simplest way." Kevin argued with confidence, as if he had done this before.

"Are you sure the show will allow this? This could be a national security concern." Susan continued.

"The contract we signed before the show, it said 'anything we find in the loot zone during the loot belongs to us'. So I'm certain it's legal, at least for now." Kevin said in attempt to convince Susan, even though he's not entirely certain of it. However, Kevin still chose to take the risk.

The camera drone did not film this part where they found the classified hard drive, nor did the live feed from their suit-cam go out on air. For now, the outside world does not know their possession of the classified hard drive. However, each team is obligated to do an on-cam loot count each day before midnight, failure to comply will lead to corresponding deductions on their raw rewards.

Susan eventually acquiesced as Kevin put the drive in his backpack, safe and secured. They then headed towards the door and ready to exit the room. Suddenly, a sound of breaking glass came from outside the room.

Kevin stopped, turned around and asked Susan: "Was that you?"

"No..." Susan stared at Kevin blankly. That fear came back, more fierce and intense this time.

They pulled out their rifles again, Kevin approached the storage room door carefully and signaled Susan not to come too close. Kevin leaned onto the wall on his right hand side and peeked to check the left end of the dark corridor. His flashlight met a glare of sunshine that leaked in from the stairway. The floor reflected the orange sunshine, as it is already dusk outside.

Nothing there on the left. Kevin then pulled out the tactical endoscope attached to the front end of the barrel handguard, stuck it outside the door frame and pointed it backwards, towards the other end of the corridor (the same direction as the strange loud noise they heard when they first entered the fifth floor fire door). As Kevin flipped the mini monitor screen on the rifle (originally folded onto the rear end of the barrel handguard), footage from the tactical endoscope came in, showing some broken pieces of glass on the ground. But this time, there's some sort of green glowing slimy liquid covered on the broken glasses.

Kevin signaled Susan to follow him, stay quiet, and watch his back. Susan seemed to have understood his hand signals, and followed behind Kevin. Kevin had already turned the safety on his rifle to 'fire', but Susan still had her rifle's safety on 'safe'. She wasn't aware of this rooky mistake at that time.

Kevin carefully approached the broken glasses next to the opening of the elevator shaft, step by step, and ready to fire anytime. He followed the trail of the weird glowing green slime, stuck his flashlight out into the dark elevator shaft and looked downwards. Kevin felt the chilling wind breezing through the elevator shaft. And Kevin saw that, deep down at the bottom of the elevator shaft, there was nothing but a shattered elevator car and a camera drone that seemed to be on standby and trying to reconnect with the show's crew.

"Hmm, maybe it was wind." Kevin scowled.

Just as Kevin was about the step back from the elevator shaft opening and call all clear to Susan, a swift dark shadow suddenly came out of nowhere and ambushed Kevin. The shadow swung from above in the elevator shaft opening and kicked Kevin away. It was a pretty hard kick, which made Kevin flew across the hallway and landed in the electrical room on the other side of the corridor after his body crashed down the door of the electrical room like a cardboard.

"Ahh!!! Fire, Susan!!! Shoot it!!!" Kevin yelled out loud in response to the sudden attack. His voice echoed all across the floor and the elevator shaft. The camera drone flew back up from the bottom of the elevator shaft to capture this sudden incident on live footage. This is the first combat encounter of the season.

Meanwhile, Susan screamed out loud like a baby. Out of extreme horror, Susan fell back down onto the floor, pointed her rifle at the shadow and pulled the trigger. But nothing was fired. Susan then quickly took her pistol out from the holster on the side of her right leg, and pulled the trigger again.

Once again, nothing was fired. Susan didn't realize that the safeties on her weapons were still on 'safe' instead of 'fire', she thought her weapons were simply jammed somehow.

"My guns are jammed!" Susan shouted out loud as the shadow quickly followed Kevin into the electrical room. She stared at the electrical room door with shock on her face.

Intense fighting noise came from inside the electrical room, gunshots, banging on the wall, swinging and kicking, etc. Just when Susan got herself up, about to charge towards the electrical room and try to save her teammate Kevin, the noises stopped and a body fell back down on the floor with a bang. The fight ended in no time, but fierce and malicious enough to make people pump adrenaline.

As predicted, Susan screamed and shouted out loud again. For a moment, she thought that body was Kevin's. Fortunately, it was not.

Susan did not see the full picture of the fight, so now let's switch to the view of the camera drone that followed behind the shadow and filmed everything.

"Woh! Attention, ladies and gentlemen! The first firearm shot just came from the biomed building at the U, where the BnB's are looting." Rayner raised his voice and passionately reported this first combat encounter of the season.

"Wait a second. You might ask: 'Isn't it prohibited to kill during the peace period?'." Jay added his comments, leading to Ed's explanation of the situation: "Well, yes, but that rule only applies to the killing of contestants."

"Exactly!" Rayner picked up the lines. "Our GPS map shows that there's no other contestants within shooting range of the BnB's. So what are they shooting at? Each other? Or something else? Let's see what happened there through our drone." Rayner asked rhetorically with his iconic cheeky smile, attempting to raise the audience's attention and curiosity.

As seen on the live feed of the camera drone from a third-person perspective of Kevin's fight with the shadow, Kevin's rifle fell on the floor next to him after he got kicked into the electrical room, with his flashlight shining on the wall.

The shadow then approached fast and entered the electrical room, Kevin kicked in its crotch area and attempted to get up from the ground.

However, Kevin's fatal kick did not work well. He felt that thing was skinny, mucous, and somewhat hard, like a skeleton covered with half-rotten flesh.

Under the camera light of the drone, the audience of *The Daring Loot* all around the nation saw clearly what that mysterious dark shadow was. Although there was only a snapshot at its back, people still recognized immediately that the shadow was a zombie, a walking-dead! Interestingly, this zombie was wearing, well, sort of "wearing" at least, a shredded lab coat.

"It's a zombie! Pouncing forward trying to bite him! Bundy stood up swiftly, he dodged those evil claws and teeth!" Rayner commented with his passionate and articulate yelling, trying his best not to get his tongue tied. The audience's hearts were pounding fast and accelerating for the first blood-boiling moment of thrill in this season. And it was only Day 1! The peace period hasn't even ended yet!

Meanwhile, the camera drone captured Kevin picking up his rifle from the floor, aiming to shoot at the zombie. But just when Kevin started pulling the trigger with his full strength, the zombie grabbed the barrel and pushed the rifle to point to the side. Shots were fired, but all landed on the wall of the electrical room, leaving a dense web of bullet holes on the pale and loose wall peels.

"Shots fired!!! Shots fired!!!" The three narrators in the ABN studio shouted out simultaneously.

"But the zombie didn't get hit. The bullets all poured onto the wall." Rayner rambles on loudly.

In the camera drone's footage, the zombie then copied Kevin's move, kicked Kevin's crotch and knocked Kevin's head with its (the zombie's) elbow at the same time. As Kevin fell down again, the zombie snatched Kevin's rifle and even mocked his (Kevin's) shooting pose.

"Bundy is down again! Is he gonna make it?!" Jay commented even louder than Rayner.

"Where's the teammate?! Where's Bing?! Why isn't she helping?!" Ed added, too loud as well.

At this critical moment of life and death, Kevin drew his pistol out, quickly flicked the safety to 'fire' and pulled the trigger. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Kevin emptied the clip out of fear.

This time, the gun fired right into the head and the chest of the zombie. Slimy green mucus splashed out from the gunshot wounds, painted all over the floor, ceiling, and walls of the electrical room, as well as the corridor. The zombie stood still for a few seconds, then fell back dead as the camera drone pulled back upwards to dodge the falling corpse of the zombie.

"And Bundy has prevailed!!!" The three narrators in the ABN studio again shouted out simultaneously.

"The ex-Navy SEAL has defeated a supernatural devil. But is that it? Or will there be more? We will find out together in the days to come." Rayner added, again with his iconic cheeky smile, to whet the audience's appetite.

Kevin stepped over the rotten zombie corpse riddled with bullet holes, with green slimy stains dotted over his face and clothes. Lucky for them, the ice flu virus is only contagious through blood transmission, so they'll be fine as long as there's no visible wound on their skins.

"What the F**K?!!" Kevin roared with vigorous anger on his face while pointing his right-hand index finger at the drone's camera.

"What in the f**king hell was that?!! Nobody said there are zombies on this f**king island!!! You motherf**kers!!!" Kevin continued roaring

as he firmly grasped the drone with his right hand and spitted on the drone's camera.

Kevin then crouched down and pointed the drone's camera at the zombie corpse. He made the audience glance over this shockingly disgusting image during dinner time. The drone's camera also captured that, on the shredded lab coat, there's a name broken tag that says "Dr. Alex * * * * * * * ffman".

Afterwards, Kevin threw the drone away angrily towards the back of the corridor, then the drone stabilized itself before hitting the floor after rolling over a round in mid-air.

"What the hell were you doing back there?! Why didn't you f**king help me?! I could've been killed, you know?!" Kevin interrogated Susan furiously.

Susan was too scared to say anything at the moment. Kevin didn't blame her too much. After all, even a tough guy like him needs a teammate during this now even more dangerous adventure. So he didn't go too hard on Susan about this first encounter.

Just when Kevin is about to walk away from the scene and exit the building with their loot as the sky is getting dark, the zombie's corpse suddenly came back to life and attempted to attack the camera drone like Kevin did earlier.

Both Kevin & Susan were spooked by this unnatural revival, Kevin immediately turned his rifle around and poured another round of bullets onto the zombie's corpse, then he saved the last bullet and shot the camera drone down with it.

"Whoops, Bundy's got some temper. This is gonna cost them deduction from their loot, which I doubt is enough to cover the drone replacement fee at the moment." Rayner said in a sarcastic tone.

Kevin threw the used empty mags away, reloaded his rifle and pistols with new fully-loaded mags drawn out from his tactical chest rig. Then he grabbed Susan's guns and checked for any jammed bullets.

"They're not jammed, you just forgot to turn the safety lever. Next time, turn it to 'fire' for shooting." Kevin taught Susan with a cold voice and showed her how to shoot with her guns.

Kevin & Susan then left the building and headed back to their truck. They walked under the setting sun, dragged their handcart half-filled with loot. The tangerine sunshine spilled on them, illuminating the oddly-colored blood shed on Kevin's jacket and chest rig.

For quite a while, they did not speak, just quietly walked back to the parking structure. The sun went down, Kevin & Susan took off their tactical jacket and chest rig, threw them inside the truck to recharge (wireless) the suit-cams and suit-mics. Then Kevin set up a portable stove and started cooking dinner. The rations they were provided with were simple, just some compressed biscuits, instant pasta, bagged juice, etc, all packed in air-tight sealed multi-layer composite high-barrier military ration packaging bags.

Kevin enjoyed the ration food, probably because he's already used to them through his military career. On the other hand, Susan didn't seem to dig these industrial-produced shelf-stable dehydrated food.

"So you're an IT geek, right? What made you come here?" Kevin broke the ice and started a chitchat while eating like a hungry ape.

"Got laid off, replaced by AGI." Susan said with a hint of disdain in her tone.

"But that shouldn't have made you broke, yes? So why pay $30000 to come here?" Kevin asked with a hint of confusion.

"This seemed like a shortcut to big cash. And eh...I actually thought the killing was all fake, like some AI-generated footage to grab some eyeballs, something like that." Susan answered, choking back tears.

"Well the killing is all real, it's what makes this show stand out among all those AI-generated programs. So tweak yourself, and get ready for more. I'll do my best to keep us alive." Kevin advised her.

"How do you do that? I mean, how could you be so...decisive, so resolute, and calm, when facing life and death?" Susan asked with wonder.

"I have nothing to lose." Kevin said with despair in his voice.

"So why are you here then?" Susan asked back, chewing some not-fully-cooked instant pasta in her mouth.

"For the truth, for redemption, for memories of the past." Kevin answered, sounding like there's much more to tell in his story, and that he did not come here simply for the money. But Susan didn't inquire further, out of politeness, since she felt that Kevin is not yet ready to fully confess yet.

After a few moment of silence, Kevin & Susan finished their tedious dinner. They leaned back on their truck bed, looked up to the starry night sky. Kevin played with the little gadgets they looted, out of boredom. Then he took the hard drive out from his chest rig, spun it in his right hand like a fidget spinner.

"Do you think you can...crack this open?" Kevin looked at Susan and asked curiously.

"You mean hack into the hard drive? Yeah, probably. But aren't we supposed to...not look into it? Since it's classified?" Susan replied with doubts on Kevin's motive.

"I think we should look into it. To make sure it's still valid, so that they will pay us to retrieve the info inside."

"Woh woh woh, you're the one who suggested we blackmail the government! So shouldn't we behave ourselves?!" Susan argued dearly in attempt to persuade Kevin not to look into the hard drive.

"Hey! Don't say that word! They might be listening, even when the mics are recharging. I'm not entirely sure about that." Kevin shushed Susan with caution.

"Anyway, it's a trade, a fair deal to make, okay? So we must make sure that the cargo is in good condition." Kevin added to convince Susan.

Susan thought deeply about it for a moment, then compromised: "Oh what the heck, screw it! Let's check it out!"

They hopped back into the truck, (gently) threw the charging jackets outside, and locked the car doors and windows. Susan placed the hard drive on top of the in-vehicle computer (at the central control panel), which is an area with wireless charging and reading capabilities.

Susan operated on the in-vehicle computer with the holographic keyboard. She magnified the interface and projected it onto the full-sized HUD[3] all over the front windshield.

Kevin watched Susan typing and running codes on the in-vehicle computer, hoping the show's crew won't notice this abnormal activity, and that the hacking won't consume too much of the truck's power, which it has just recharged from an afternoon of tropical sun light.

After a flash show of puzzling and dizzying computer programming, Susan successfully accessed the hard drive. As Kevin had hoped, the hard drive is completely intact and still readable.

[3]Abbreviation for "Head-Up Display".

File folders cascaded across the holographic screen and swarmed into their sight. Research notes, mortality rate calculations, molecular structure images titled "**ONYX J-SERIES STRAINS**" (One of them was marked as "**J-117**", the same mark on the vials that Susan found in the cold-storage units on the fifth floor of the biomed building.), infection simulations, deployment maps, etc. And then, a classified Pentagon memo marked as "**TOP SECRET**" and titled "**OPERATION FROSTFALL**".

Kevin read over the HUD, with his blood cooling: "……field test on contained population……assess societal collapse parameters……deny all involvement……"

"The ice flu wasn't an accident." Susan said with a hollow voice, gasping and choking in shock. "They released it here deliberately."

"This cannot stay hidden any longer, we have to get this out." Kevin's jaw tightened and mumbled.

"We have to spread the words!" Kevin reemphasized with determination as he turned to his right-hand side and stared at Susan with his reddening eyes.

"But we can't do that now, they've blocked us from accessing the internet during the loot, both uplink and downlink. And if we force a camera to film those files, they will just cut our feed." Susan argued, putting Kevin into deep thinking. They both knew that the only way they can publicize their findings in the hard drive is to survive until the loot ends and then successfully exfils from the island.

Meanwhile, outside their sight, a camera drone descended from high above their truck and approached their truck bed. It was time for the on-cam loot count.

"Drone incoming!" Kevin said alarmingly when he heard the noise of the propellers.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" Kevin asked Susan to shut down the HUD and the in-vehicle computer as he attempted to hide the hard drive from the drone.

Susan complied, she rapidly turned off the HUD and the in-vehicle computer. Then Kevin grabbed the hard drive, flipped it over, and placed it among their other loot on the truck bed, with the other side (the clean side without the DoD[4] seal and the "**CLASSIFIED**" text) of the hard drive facing up.

"Please reveal your loot for counting." The camera drone spoke loudly with a cold robotic voice from its speaker. Kevin & Susan pointed at those machine parts on the truck bed, and they signaled the camera drone to count their loot. They watched warily at the camera drone as it counted their loot for Day 1.

Deep in their minds, Kevin & Susan did their best in suppressing the desire to just catch the drone and share everything they just found in the classified files to the entire world. The lie, the murder of an island, and the cold hard truth.

They didn't know that, over two thousand miles away, in the control room at the ABN headquarter in Seattle, a government liaison in a black suit was watching to make sure nobody loots anything they shouldn't find on the island. The government liaison didn't spot the hard drive, not yet at least.

After the on-cam loot count were done for all contestants, the raw loot values of each team were displayed live on the show. "At the moment, the Gordon brother-sister got the most loot, just a few hundred dollars

[4]Abbreviation for "Department of Defense".

more than the newly-weds Ochoa and Chan, then Andrew and Colvin came in third place, and the BnB's are on the fourth place." Jay and Ed announced the teams' ranks of Day 1 together.

"And that was Day 1 on Season 5 of *The Daring Loot*! By this midnight local time, the peace period will end and the ban on killing will be lifted! What will happen when the beasts are unleashed? Tune in tomorrow at noon PDT[5] to find out." Rayner concluded the day with his iconic cheeky smile at midnight in Seattle (09:00 pm in Honolulu).

"Thank you for watching *The Daring Loot* on ABN Entertainments. I'm J.C. Rayner." Rayner lead the sign-off lines.

"I'm Jay Wise." Jay followed Rayner's sign-off line.

"And I'm Ed Wise." Ed followed Jay and Rayner's sign-off lines.

"Good night!" The three show hosts said together loudly and then bowed to the audience with cheerful smiles on their faces.

As the hosts walked down the stage, the live feed of the show cut to a cheerful rerun of highlight clips from previous seasons, with *The Daring Loot* theme song as background music.

[5]Abbreviation for "Pacific Daylight Time".

Chapter III

The Hunt Begins

Sunrise at Downtown Honolulu — Monday, July 2nd, 2046

After taking turns to stand guard through the night, Kevin & Susan welcomed their first sunrise on the loot. They woke up early from the long, boring, but dreadful night.

Watching the orange-white sun rose from the horizon, Kevin & Susan chewed their tedious, dehydrated, barely swallowable energy bars.

"Did you hear any shooting last night?" Susan asked Kevin.

"Just once, I think. Far from here, probably some sneaky night-raid." Kevin replied calmly.

After breakfast, Kevin got into the truck and pulled out the map on their in-vehicle computer, trying to look for the next location to go for loot. While he was thinking, the circular boundary of the loot zone started shrinking and shifting towards the northwest.

"The circle is shifting." Susan reminded Kevin, pointing her finger on the holographic map. As the circle approached, they had to start moving to avoid getting disqualified.

"Where should we go?" Kevin asked Susan after he moved the gear shift lever to D and started driving.

"Ehh...which direction did you hear gunshots last night?" Susan asked Kevin.

"Downtown I think, same direction as the beach we landed." Kevin thought for a moment and answered.

"Then let's go there, downtown. They should've moved too. And there are two major banks at the Kapiolani Blvd." Susan suggested.

"Good idea, no two shells will land in the same crater." Kevin agreed so, while Susan scanned their surrounding for any hostile activities throughout the trip.

After a twenty-minute drive through the deserted chaos of this once bustling city, they parked under the Pan Am Building at 1600 Kapiolani Blvd. They geared up, got out of their truck, and entered an American Savings Bank inside the Pan Am Building.

In the tropical weather, wearing those heavy gears are hot and sweating. But they had to put them on for their own sakes, in preparation for whatever might happen on this treacherous island. Who knows what else is the show hiding from the contestants.

Stepping through the broken pieces of glass at the entrance, Kevin & Susan found nothing but more debris and bullet shells on the floor. They leaped over the bank counters, dived deeper to the back, and found the way to the vault. The vault was already mostly empty, with only a bunch of wrinkled old cash scattered over the floor.

A camera drone followed them and captured this horrifying scene: two severely damaged bodies lied on the stairway to the vault, one can barely tell these two clumps of flesh and blood were once humans. The air was filled with the smell of dead meat, so sanguinary but still seemed fresh.

Susan can't bear this anymore, she moved her eyes away, covered her nose, and returned to the lobby. On the other hand, Kevin crouched down and checked the shattered bodies carefully.

"This is only a few hours old. The killers might not be far, so stay sharp." Kevin reminded Susan.

"Hey come over here." Susan yelled, but her voice sounded faded in Kevin's ears.

"Coming!" Kevin yelled back. He took the wristbands on the dead bodies, and ran back to the lobby. Kevin followed Susan's voice to the underground parking lot at the back on the other side of the bank. Susan pointed her flashlight at one of the cars in the parking lot: "I think that's their truck. They've been raided."

"Yeah, very recently." Kevin agreed as he approached the truck and check for leftover loot.

"All clear, nothing's left in there." Kevin said with disappointment, his voice echoed across the underground parking lot.

"Let's go check the First Hawaiian Bank across the street." Susan suggested, and Kevin nodded in silence.

Kevin & Susan crossed the Kaheka St and entered the First Hawaiian Bank. The conditions in there was better than the American Savings Bank, but not by a lot. The contestants that visited here have already took every value thing they can find.

"Whoever looted this place must be filthy rich now." Susan said with disappointment.

"Come on, let's go loot somewhere else. I know a jewel store down the street, a whole building of it, there must be something valuable left in there." Kevin sighed, and then suggested a new plan.

A few minutes later, Kevin & Susan drove to the House of Diamonds (a jewelry repair service facility) at 1357 Kapiolani Blvd. They left their disguised truck outside to recharge under the tropical sunshine, and then entered the building. They climbed up the stairs, aiming for the jewelry storage room on the 11th floor.

Meanwhile, as the time came to 12 o'clock PDT, episode 2 of Season 5 of *The Daring Loot* started airing live on the ABN Entertainments channel. "Good day, looters! And welcome back to *The Daring Loot*!" Rayner welcomed the audience with a warm greeting.

"It's now Day 2 of Season 5, let's see what happened last night." Rayner continued, then pointed to the big screen behind him. A highlight clip of last night's rivalry was projected onto the big screen, audience across the nation all held their breath and stared at their screens/monitors for updates on the show.

"Previously on *The Daring Loot*" An AI-generated Rayner's voice said as the program's logo faded away to the camera drone footage captured during the first night.

"Last night, one team was eliminated, and another team is now down to one. At the Kaheka St, Moore & Smith and Andrew & Colvin took over two different banks, just a street-cross from each other. These two teams looted peacefully at first, but Moore & Smith launched a surprise strike after midnight, and turned Andrew & Colvin into meat sauce!" The AI-generated Rayner's voice narrated with little emotion, and the audience

all gasped when they saw the video of Moore & Smith's midnight raid and the images of Andrew & Colvin's shattered bodies.

On the big screen, a video showed that Moore & Smith sneaked into the American Savings Bank at approximately 01:30 am local time, and killed Andrew & Colvin in their sleep. One of them (Andrew) wasn't dead after the first round of fire, he (Andrew) dragged Colvin's body back when Moore & Smith was looting their (Andrew & Colvin's) truck. But Andrew was spotted and didn't make it after Moore & Smith returned for the loot in the vault.

"The $4800 first kill-shot reward has been credited to Moore & Smith, they are are now rich enough to come in second place in the raw reward ranks. On the other hand, which hapless dude is now playing solo?" The real Rayner narrated while guiding the audience to the next clip.

On the big screen, the video feed cut to another camera drone. The footage showed that, in a large room with faint lights, a corpse lied on the floor. Jewelry accessories, papers, blood, and some other surrounded the corpse. But there's not gunshot wound on the corpse, and it's not dead yet!

"Ladies and gentlemen, this one now, is live. Let me remind you that this is not a dead body, it's a wronged soul abandoned by his teammate, and his name is...I'm sorry, was, Ray Louisville." Rayner said with a lowered voice. Meanwhile, Kevin & Susan came up to this floor (the 7th floor) from the stairwell.

This was not their target at first. However, they noticed something unusual when they glanced over there.

"Wait a sec, there's light here." Susan stopped at the fire door and said.

"Of course there's light, it's morning now." Kevin said without looking as he passed over the floor quickly.

"No, no, look! There are light bulbs blinking in the back!" Susan said, pointing her finger to the back down the office area on the 7th floor.

Kevin immediately returned from above the stairs and peeked into the office area on the 7th floor. He saw those red emergency lights blinking on the back, and put his index finger on his lips, signaling Susan to shush.

"There may be other players here." Kevin whispered to Susan quietly, and hand-signaled her to crawl forward behind him.

As the red emergency lights blinking at the back of the office area, a camera drone suddenly came out from a conference room with frosted glass. The camera light was turned to maximal lumen, illuminating most of the area near the conference room, but dazzled Kevin & Susan's eyes for a moment. At that moment, they knew something's in there. A fight is now inevitable, since the other drone on their back also came up close and turned it's light to maximum.

Kevin gently moved to a counter by the conference room door, he stared at the reflection on the coffee maker next to the water cooler. Then he turned around, blindly spread ammunition into the room with his AR-15, but his body still behind the counter.

"Pre-fire, very professional." Jay commented in the ABN studio.

A brief sobbing came from inside the conference room, then stopped. Just as Kevin & Susan stood up to check the situation in the conference room, several zombies crawled and approached them fast. Some of them, including the contestant (R. Louisville) that was bitten and mutated, crawled with only the upper-half of their bodies, stretching long tails of blood on the ground and making loud scratching noise. Their (both Kevin & Susan and the zombies) teeth trembling, desperately aiming to terminate each other.

"Here they come, flooding through a bottleneck, will the BnB's fight like warriors or run like cowards?" Ed provoked Kevin & Susan remotely.

Under two camera drones, Kevin & Susan fired at the zombies on auto mode while gradually taking steps backwards. When one is reloading, the other one kept firing, or kicked the office chairs towards the lunging zombies to stumble them.

After a few rounds of bullet shower, the zombies were all disassembled in continuous firearm violence and their flesh spattered over the floor, the walls, the frosted glass, and the office furniture, all painted in green and red fluids.

After the shooting was over, Susan notice that one of the zombies had a wristband, and she asked Kevin to collect it.

"The wristbands count as loot, right?" Susan asked Kevin with confusion.

"They should." Kevin answered quietly, but he would've taken the wristbands either way, as the memory of the deceased contestants.

Kevin scraped the blood and mucus off Louisville's wristband, smeared those disgusting fluids on one of the camera drone's lens as it took a close-up shot at the BnB's in front of their flustered faces. He then turned half way around and attempted to smear the other camera drone's lens as well, but that drone ascended to the roof swiftly and dodged Kevin's dirty fingers.

In response, Kevin took a few shot at the ceiling, as a declaration of their second victory against the unexpected zombies. But this time he did not shoot the drones done again since the drone replacement would cost from their raw rewards.

Kevin & Susan picked up the few valuable jewelry accessories on that floor and put them in their pockets. They then returned to the stairwell and moved upstairs with more caution than before.

They safely arrived at the 11th floor, killed a few more zombies on the way, but nothing too serious. The 11th floor was indeed a jewelry storage space in the past, but there wasn't much left when Kevin & Susan arrived.

"How did you know this place?" Susan asked Kevin while taking whatever shiny things were left in the jewelry display stand.

"Before joining the military, I used to work here as a night guard." Kevin answered, his voice still low, but now less strained.

"It seems like this place has already been looted." Susan complained with a trace of disappointment.

"Never mind, still enough for us." Susan muttered to herself.

Kevin & Susan put the jewels (mostly raw stones) in a bag they found on the 7th floor earlier. Kevin walked outside, to the balcony on the corner of the 11th floor. He took out his binoculars and looked around the ruins of this former state capital, planning a safe route for their next step.

It's already afternoon, but they still haven't had lunch yet. So they went downstairs soon and walked back to their truck, set up their portable stove and made lunch under the awning of the parking lot. It was the hottest time of the day, the sun high above their heads, and chewy rations in their mouth.

While they spaced out during the meal, gunshot noises suddenly came from the mall across the street. Kevin & Susan immediately proned

behind a concrete barrier, out of instinct. But the gunshots weren't aimed at them, or anybody, it possessed some sort of pattern.

"Bang bang...bang...bang bang." Moments later, the pattern repeated, and then more patterned shots were fired from the same origin: "Bang bang bang bang (H)...bang bang (I).....Bang bang-bang (A)...bang bang-bang bang bang (L)...bang-bang bang-bang bang-bang (O)...bang bang bang bang (H)...bang bang-bang (A)."

"That's Morse code, I think he's saying 'hello'. 'Aloha' actually, to be exact." Kevin understood the shooting pattern.

"Why would people say 'hello' to us? Aren't we supposed to kill each other?" Susan asked sarcastically, with a hint of panic in her tone.

Kevin shot back the greeting pattern with Morse code, aiming the barrel at the sky. Then he took out his binoculars when he heard the other guy shoot the pattern back once again. His vision swept the rough direction of the source of the other gunshot, and saw a beard man waving his arms on the roof of the shopping mall. He looked injured, tired, and just got off a tough battle.

"I...SOLO...,...TEAM...UP...?" The other guy shot at the sky again, continuing their conversation in Morse code. At this distance, it's too far too just shout out words with mouth, but one can not get closer safely without assuring the other party is of friendly intentions.

"What's he saying?" Susan looked at Kevin and asked.

"He wants to team up with us, I think." Kevin answered after mumbling to himself for a moment.

"Is that even allowed?" Kevin doubted, he didn't want to break the rules and get disqualified.

"I don't know. They didn't mention this in the rules.....Well, they didn't say it's not allowed." Susan hesitated, she didn't want to get disqualified either.

"OK.....COME...TO...US" Kevin shot Morse code again, asking the other guy to get closer so that they can talk directly.

"I asked him to come closer, this Morse code thing is a waste of bullets." Kevin told Susan about his plan.

"What?! Are you nuts? He could kill us!" Susan panicked.

"Relax, I think he's genuine. He's solo, if he wanted to kill us, he would've ambushed in silence, not shooting Morse code into the sky." Kevin soothed Susan with reason.

"Just stay with me, I will do the talking." Kevin continued and emphasized.

Kevin & Susan watched that man drove his half-broken truck from the Walmart parking lot towards them. As he approached the night club across the street from their parking lot, Kevin shot three times at the sky, to make that man stop right there.

"Stop! Stop right there!" Kevin yelled with his mouth wide open, while aiming his AR-15 at the driver seat on the man's truck.

The man complied and stopped his truck. He seemed cooperative and sincerely want to team up with Kevin & Susan.

"Stay in the truck, and throw your weapons out!" Kevin yelled to him again, still aiming at the man with his rifle.

"Now!" Susan yelled as well.

"Okay okay!" The man yelled back, he sounded a little impatient, but still did what Kevin asked. An AR-15, a pistol, a knife, and a fire axe were thrown out from the broken window of his truck.

Kevin & Susan walked down the driving ramp of the parking lot, and approached the mysterious man. At about 100 meters away from the man's truck, Kevin asked Susan to collect those weapons on the ground, while he yelled to the mysterious man: "You alone? Identify yourself!"

"Yes, I'm alone! My name is Oliver, Oliver Swinton." The man yelled back with a trembling voice.

Kevin slowly walked closer towards Oliver, who is still putting both his arms upwards (the surrender pose) in the truck.

"Where's your teammate?" Kevin asked with a lower and more less fearful voice.

"Dead! Ray was my teammate, he's dead." Oliver answered, trying to convince Kevin to put down his gun.

Susan has grabbed those weapons that Oliver threw on the ground, and took them far away. Kevin now believes this man is probably safe for contact, so he put down his rifle, but still has one hand on the gun handle.

Kevin walked up to the truck, shook Oliver's left hand and greeted him politely: "Hi, I'm Kevin, and this is Susan, nice to meet you."

Oliver's hands were shivering so hard as if he had Parkinson's disease, and his palms were filled with cold sweat, out of obvious fear for death. Oliver took a wild gamble that Kevin & Susan are good folks when he watched them entered the House of Diamonds from far away, and he was lucky to win this bet.

"What happened to your teammate?" Susan asked Oliver, leaning against his truck.

"We were...eh we were in that building, the jewelry firm." Oliver pointed his index finger at the House of Diamonds, and he continued with aftershock in his tone: "There were...eh...creatures, they ate him. They ate Ray, my teammate."

"You mean he got bit by zombies." Kevin explained the situation to Oliver.

"Yeah yeah...the zombies...anyway, it happened so quick, I got too panicked and just ran away." Oliver said with tears coming out from his eyes, and he started weeping: "I left him in there...but I was too scared....."

"Alright, alright, you are with us now." Kevin patted Oliver on his back, and asked him to follow them: "Follow our car, will you?"

Oliver nodded, wiping his tears off his reddened eyes.

Kevin & Susan walked back to get their truck, loaded Oliver's weapons in their truck, and then drove down the parking lot to rendezvous with Oliver.

"Come on, I know a place." Kevin rolled down the car window and said to both Oliver and Susan.

Two engines roared across the streets overgrown with weeds, towards the northwest, chasing the setting sun.

"Where are we going?" Susan asked Kevin on the way, though she had already guessed the answer in her head.

"You'll know when we get there, totally safe to spend the night." Kevin said with supreme confidence.

About fifteen minutes later, Kevin parked on the 6th floor (semi-roof) of the Keauhou Place Apartments[1] parking building at 555 South St.

"This is it, my old place. We should be safe here, and it's got good views too." Kevin said with lightened mood, looking up at the apartment building wrapped in green vines and ivies.

"This was your home?" Oliver followed behind and parked next to them.

"Yeah, it was, a long time ago." Kevin answered him briskly, while they both grabbed essential belongings to take upstairs.

"Hey, your weapons stay with us for now. Prove yourself to be trustworthy, and then we'll give them back to you. Follow behind us, and be quiet." Kevin told Oliver, still cannot trust him completely.

Oliver nodded as they walked into the apartment building together, with Kevin in the front, Susan in the middle, and Oliver in the back.

Kevin & Susan only brought their own weapons, and left Oliver's weapons in their truck[2]. Following Kevin's lead, Susan entered the stairwell with Kevin and slowly climbed upstairs with utmost caution. However, Oliver didn't follow up behind them.

Oliver looked at the closed elevator shaft door opposite to the stairwell entrance. He picked up a threaded steel bars on the ground and pried open the elevator door, making a disturbingly loud noise.

Kevin & Susan heard the noise, they walked back down to the half-floor platform between the 6th floor and the 7th floor in the stairwell. Kevin took a look at Oliver as he was slapping the elevator cable with the steel

[1]Later referred to as "the apartment building" or "the apartment" for simplicity.

[2]The trucks were paired with the smart wristbands, contestants can only unlock the truck designated to their team with their smart wristbands. For a contestant to unlock and drive another team's truck, the only way one could do that is to steal the other team's smart wristband(s).

bar, resulting in sharp high-pitch noises echoing in the dark elevator shaft.

"What the hell are you doing? What did I just tell you?!" Kevin shouted to Oliver with a lowered voice.

"Checking for zombies, they are drawn to high-pitch noises." Oliver said in a normal volume.

"So are people, you moron! There could be other players in the building, and you just gave away our presence." Kevin yelled with anger in his voice.

"I just don't want to get ambushed out of nowhere."Oliver said quietly, with his head facing down.

"Great, you just woke up everybody, Einstein." Kevin argued sarcastically, spreading his arms out in the air.

As the camera drone recorded their quarrel, the alarming sounds of zombies banging on the walls came from upstairs and from the elevator shaft.

Based on the intensity of the zombie noises, one can infer that there are plenty of them in this apartment building.

"This way, the stairwell is no longer safe." Kevin walked down the stairs, signaling Susan and Oliver to follow behind him.

"And no more noises." Kevin warned Oliver angrily, pointing his finger at Oliver's face.

The three contestants came exited the apartment building, took a detour around the parking lot roof and went upstairs via the fire escape outside the building. The fire escape stairs were heavily rusted, still holding, but

they had to step upwards cautiously. They may all fall if one of them stomps a bit too hard on the fire escape stairs.

With the creaking of the fire escape stairs, they arrived at the ninth floor, out side the bathroom window of unit #9E[3]. Kevin broke the window by gently smashing the glass with the gunstock on his rifle. Then he reached inside the window, grabbed an aged bath towel hanging on the shelf next to the wall, and laid the bath towel on the window frame to prevent them from getting hurt by the remaining glass shards.

Kevin was the first to climbed over the window and got inside, then he lent hand to Susan and helped her get inside safely. At last, Oliver also safely climbed over with Kevin's help.

The three contestants broke into unit #9E, crossed the living room and bedrooms, heading for the door. The door was shut, but they heard the zombies stomping and roaring on the other side. Both parties had smelled each other, and were preparing for combat.

"Battle stations everyone! There are tons of them!" Kevin reminded Susan and Oliver to get ready for close contact with the zombies, once again.

"Wait, I don't have a gun!" Oliver shouted panically.

"Here, use mine." Kevin handed his pistol to Oliver, also threw him a few rounds of mags.

"You know how to shoot, right? Turn the safety switch to 'fire'." Susan reminded Oliver not to repeat her previous mistake.

"Yeah, thanks for the heads up." Oliver said to Susan.

[3]See Figure VII.6 for detailed floor plan.

"Ready? On three." Kevin notified them to get ready for fighting as he was about the shoot the door open.

"No..." Susan and Oliver whispered simultaneously, with fear filled up their eyes once again.

Bang bang bang! Kevin shot at the knob and lock on the front door of unit #9E, the door opened with the pounding and scratching noise of the zombies, then the crowd of the walking-dead were met with a shower of bullets.

As the slaughter begins in the apartment, the camera drone ascended high above their head to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. Live on air, the drone footage naturally transitioned into a third-person POV[4] from above the roof of the room, like the top-view perspective angle in some 3D third-person video games. This is precisely the kind of misleading camera language[5] that the general audience of the show would've misinterpreted as AI-generated footage, because it incorporates the interior of closed structures that no physical camera can capture without post-production effects.

As the crossfire reached its first climax, the top-view camera[6] rotated 90° horizontally to the counterclockwise direction, then gradually translated towards the right as the three contestants under the camera pushed forward (in their perspective) towards the public hallways of the apartment building.

"Now back to the BnB's at the Keauhou apartments, and they seem to have a third team member on the play..." Jay narrated live on the show.

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[4]Abbreviation for "Point of View".

[5]For better visual reference, please refer to the **dragon's breath scene** in the movie *John Wick: Chapter 4*.

[6]This camera view applies from here to the fourth paragraph on page #52, pairing with the theme song of *The Daring Loot*.

"That is technically not against the rules, but highly unrecommended. And no more time for chitchat, the flock of zombies are flooding in..." Ed added to Jay's comments.

"They are pouring ammo on the undead, will they clear the floow?!" Rayner picked up the line.

Zombies swarmed in through the front door of unit #9E, which is a bottleneck area, so the zombies were stuck and started to heap upon each other. Fortunately, Kevin & Susan provided enough fire power to get through this pile of walking-dead. They successfully pushed through as the top-view camera translated to the right, keeping the three contestants at the left-bound of the live footage. Oliver stayed behind them as Kevin & Susan lead the assault forward, providing cover fire when they had to reload their mags.

They've made it to the middle of the hallway, while more and more zombies were still coming in from the rooms on the other side. Kevin was in the front-most position among the three contestants, but he suddenly stopped shooting. He had emptied a mag, but he wasn't out of ammo. Instead, he seemed to have drifted off, staring blankly at the zombies surging forward one after another.

"Bundy is out of ammo! He's just standing there! He dozed off! And he's gonna get bitten!" Ed commented excitingly.

Inside Kevin's head, time was almost frozen, and he had a flashback of what this place used to be like in the past (before the ice flu). When the zombies were plunging towards him, Kevin had a vision that his old neighbors and his ex-fiancee were all smiling at him, waving at him, and welcoming him to come home.

But another voice in his head fought back, Kevin cannot allow sorrow to dominate over reason, especially under this dire situation. Deep in his heart, Kevin knew that he couldn't have saved those people on that

unprecedented day sixteen years ago. Now, Kevin must face and defeat this faded obsession in his memory.

"Reload, K! What are you doing?" Susan shouted desperately, trying to wake Kevin up from his poorly-timed flashback.

It didn't work well. They zombies were coming too close, and their fire power isn't holding any longer. Susan had to fall back and reload, so she backed into unit #9C, and then Oliver followed Susan into unit #9C after pushing Kevin into unit #9H (which is across the hall from unit #9C) improvisedly.

"But the third guy pushed him away! They've split apart!" Jay caught up with the scene.

Kevin fell into unit #9H, he finally woke up from the flashback and saw nothing but bloody rotten bodies with sharp teeth in their wide-opened mouths.

Kevin attempted to reload his AR-15, he quickly threw the empty mag away and reached for a new mag on his chest rig. But the zombies got too close, he didn't have time to put the new mag on. As the zombies plunged in attempt to bite and eat him, Kevin swung his rifle like cold steel and knocked the zombies in their heads. Mucus and blood spilled out and landed on Kevin's back when he turned around to make a roundhouse kick.

"This is not a good sign, because...Bundy has to solo the crowd!!! He can't shoot this close!" Rayner again picked up the line, he sounded very excited.

The roundhouse kick tripped a few zombies in the front row and bought Kevin a little time to reload his rifle. He took a few shots at the crowd of zombies, but they are pushing too fast. Kevin had to back up step by step, he was forced onto the balcony, and then he had to

jump off the balcony. Some zombies jumped off after Kevin due to the bottleneck inertia that they cannot resist.

"Wow!!! How Bruce Lee was that?!! He has reloaded, but it's too late! And he fell!!!" Rayner continued, his voice getting more and more passionate.

Millions of hearts pounded even harder when Kevin fell out of the camera footage. Meanwhile, Susan and Oliver suppressed the waves of zombies for a little while, but many more turned around and targeted at them after Kevin fell off the balcony on his side. They also had to take steps back, into the master bedroom on the mauka[7] side of the apartment.

While Susan strafed, Oliver shot and broke the glass windows with his pistol. They jumped out of the bedroom window, one after another, and landed on the balcony of unit #9B. Many more zombies stormed out of the #9C window due to the irresistible momentum bottleneck effect and fell off the building.

The balcony door at unit #9B was tightly sealed from the inside, thus Susan and Oliver were temporarily safe. The top-view camera footage ended here and gradually transitioned back to a more realistic (and more familiar) drone view from behind Susan & Oliver, taking a break on the #9B balcony.

Then, on the other side, the live feed was cut to another camera drone that just arrived down stairs (on the side where Kevin fell off), capturing what happened to Kevin after he fell off the #9H balcony.

Kevin landed in a swimming pool on the over-roof structure built on top of the 6th floor (semi-roof) of the parking building. Following Kevin's fall, some zombies landed near him, either in the swimming

[7] See Figure VII.6.

pool or in the adjacent open-air lounge area. The zombies got themselves up and continued to attack Kevin, but he drew his pistol out agilely and killed the few zombies that landed too close to him. Then he got himself up onto the bank of the swimming pool and shot the rest of the fallen zombies with his AR-15.

Kevin took a deep breath, but he still couldn't stop gasping hard. He put on his headset hanging on his neck while reorganizing himself.

"Su, are you there? You guys okay?" Kevin asked eagerly.

"Yeah, we're good, K." Susan replied, as calmly as she could.

"We got a few more up here, I think." Oliver said into Susan's headset.

"Stay safe, I'm coming up." Kevin said, then he immediately climbed over the fence of the over-roof structure and rushed back to their truck to retrieve more bullets.

Afterwards, Kevin rushed back to the 9th floor through the usual stairwell on the diamondhead[8] side of the apartment building. He slowed down his steps when he reached the half-floor platform between the 8th floor and the 9th floor. Kevin took a quick peek on both directions, then he moved forward and rendezvoused with Susan & Oliver at the front door of unit #9B. The three contestants are together again, and they cleared the few remaining zombies in rooms #9I, #9J, and #9K.

Finally, they broke into Kevin's old apartment — unit #9A. There was no sign of breaking-in, the apartment room looked almost exactly the same as it was sixteen years ago, except the balcony door was wide open and years of sea breezes has blown off the little gadgets on tables and counter-tops, there were also some old clothes and toilet paper scattered on the dirty aged floor.

[8] See Figure VII.6.

This place brought back too many memories for Kevin, so he sat down on the old sofa in the living room, took off his gears and put them aside. Kevin close his eyes, covered his face with his hands, and then he let those memories sink in. Susan and Oliver didn't want to interrupt this moment of zen for Kevin, so they settled down in another room, giving Kevin the space and time he needed.

With a brief static noise, the camera drone following them moved aside and switched to standby mode, then the live feed on the show was cut to other teams.

After a thrilling adrenaline-fueled combat against the herd of zombies, the three contestants spent the rest of the day in Kevin's old apartment to restore themselves.

Kevin picked up an old photo (in a rotted frame, showing Kevin and his families at a beach party) on the coffee table, memories stormed into Kevin's head, and visions of that day reappeared in front of his eye. He saw himself on an aircraft carrier, his helicopter had just took off from the main deck, he sat by the helicopter door, watching panicking crowds trying to flee the island in whatever vehicle they can find. Yachts, sailboats, civil aircraft, all sprinting towards the naval blockade.

A cold, calm, ruthless voice came in Kevin's headset: "Terminate them all, use live fire, nobody gets out alive." The command to open fire came directly from the head of the Department of Defense.

Kevin was ordered to fire live ammunition at civilians. Among the fleeing civilians, there might be people he knew, perhaps even people he loved. Kevin hesitated for a moment, but he pulled the trigger anyways after being repeatedly ordered to do so, he was trained to be a creature that blindly follows orders from superior officers. By dusk on that bloody Sunday, the ocean around the island of O'ahu had been stained

red by blood, sparkling like a scarlet ribbon covered by millions of glitters under the tropical sunset.

For sixteen years, Kevin tried his best to avoid looking back on that day, and now he must reconcile with himself. Thus Kevin came back to this island on *The Daring Loot* to pay off his moral debt for that unforgettable past.

Nightfall, time passed faster than Kevin thought. He woke up from the flooding memories and cleaned up himself. Kevin put all his old photos facing down, as a gesture of moving on. The blood stains on his gears are silently telling the battle he had seen today, and now he finally have some time to regroup for further competition.

The three of them replenished their arms supply with the leftover bullets and guns found in Kevin's apartment. As a veteran, Kevin used to keep a whole room of firearms in his apartment. Even though most of them had became malfunctional or rusted over the years, some are still operational and will be useful for their future combats.

Kevin & Susan have not rested well since they landed on this island because they had to move frequently and also constantly take turns to stand guard when they are not moving. It's only Day 2, and the special three-person team now voted to take a day off on Day 3, to take a break from the killing and restore energy in Kevin's old apartment.

Through the adventure on Day 2, Kevin & Susan formed tighter bonds in combat. Furthermore, they got a trustworthy helper, their third pal — Oliver Swinton, who has earned more trust from Kevin & Susan by fighting on their sides.

After successfully hiding the hard drive again from the on-cam loot count of Day 2, Kevin, Susan, and Oliver sat down at the dinning room and had a feast. They exchanged their life stories with each other, and discussed the plans for the next few days.

"So what made you sign up for this show?" Susan broke the ice with Oliver.

"My best buddy Ray, he thought this was a good opportunity to get rich, so he asked me to come with him, and here I am." Oliver said with a quiet voice.

"Classic. Isn't that why we are all here?" Kevin said sarcastically.

"I wasn't broke, you know? I was a high school teacher, I didn't have to come here. Just trying to be a good friend, and I thought the killing scenes were all synthesized." Oliver explained.

"By the way, may I have my guns back?" Oliver asked Kevin.

"Tomorrow we stay put and regroup. If you're still alive by dawn on Day 4, and still haven't betrayed us, then you can have your guns back." Kevin answered without emotion, continued feasting on his ration dinner.

"But what if more zombies attack when I'm standing guard?" Oliver argued.

"You don't get to stand guard. And that's a precaution, not a privilege." Kevin told Oliver to obey his orders, so that trust can be earned from this paranoid soldier.

As the time was getting late, cloud thickens in the dark sky. Cloud seeding rockets were launched from a vessel far from the shoreline. When Susan was patching up the wounds on Kevin's arm (mildly injured during the combat earlier that day), they noticed the long red tails of the rockets plunging up high into the clouds, splashing crimson sparkles that partially illuminated the thickened clouds.

"Hey, what's that?" Susan pointed at the sky with a hint of suspicion.

"Rain seed rockets, I think. But I don't know why they do this." Kevin said and then yawned, sounded very tired and sleepy.

"The rain will draw the zombies out, then they can go anywhere to attack people." Oliver overheard their conversation, he sat up from the bed and cleared their confusion.

Kevin & Susan turned around and looked at him curiously, so Oliver continued his explanation: "The zombies were infected by fungi, fungi love moisture and hate sun light.....I taught science class in high school."

"More reasons to hide out for tomorrow." Susan sighed with relief, and Kevin & Oliver nodded in agreement.

Meanwhile, back in the ABN studio, the three show hosts concluded this thrilling day, spoiling to the audience that the fighting is about to get more and more intense in the following days.

"Two days down, five more to go. Good luck, contestants! Tune in the same time tomorrow, only on ABN Entertainments. And good night, America!" Rayner and the Wise brothers finished their hosting duty on Day 2 with a deep bow to the audience.

Chapter IV

The Heart of the Beast

Unit #9A, Keauhou Place Apartments — Tuesday, July 3rd, 2046

"Good day, America! And good morning to our players too! It's now Day 3 on Season 5 of *The Daring Loot*!" Rayner greeted the audience of the show and the contestants as well.

"Last night passed peacefully, no further eliminations of contestants yet." Jay briefed the audience. And then Ed summarized the current situation on *The Daring Loot*: "So far, three out of the twenty-four contestants are dead, two were eliminated by other contestants, the other one got bitten by zombies and mutated."

"As we speak, we have the first team in this season to challenge the Champion Duel! Let's switch to that and see how it goes." Rayner caught up the cue from his producer.

The program director immediately switched the live feed to a camera drone hovering high above the National Memorial Cemetery of the

Pacific[1], capturing the melee duel between the tactical combat droid and the contestants Y. Kobayashi & L. Taylor.

Kobayashi & Taylor was circling around the arena (the National Memorial Cemetery), with the TCD tailing behind their truck and catching up fast. Meanwhile, in the apartment building, Kevin, Susan, and Oliver watched the duel with their binoculars. They were pretty focused, trying to gain some experience for their future combats.

"Where did they get a harpoon cannon?" Susan muttered to herself as she watched Taylor shot a harpoon in the truck bed and it hooked up to the front armor of the TCD.

The rain continued, wetting the air with the smell of mud and blood. The hook successfully destabilized the TCD. The TCD first tried to pull the harpoon out from its chest with both its arms, while its legs were plowing the ground in attempt to stop the truck from dragging it. But brute force did not work well this time. The TCD's feet hit a tombstone on the ground, then it lost balance and tumbled forward. It landed with its face down, the truck was still towing the TCD in circles, forcing it to hit more and more tombstones.

Kobayashi & Taylor's plan was to knock out the TCD and then safely retrieve its power core. But Taylor got too impatient, he jumped off the truck bed and landed on the TCD's back.

"Wow! Cowboy Taylor is gonna strip out the power core from its back! That's a truly daring move!" Rayner commented in the live show.

However, the TCD wasn't knocked out yet, its robotic head rotated 180° backwards and emitted two laser beams from its eyes. These laser

[1]This Cemetery is the current arena of the Champion Duel, which was built in an ancient volcanic crater.

beams weren't like the ones that superman had, they are not that powerful, but they still temporarily blinded Taylor.

Obviously, Kobayashi & Taylor didn't expect that from the TCD, these were new upgrades for this season. Taylor managed to balance himself again, and soon got his vision back. He pushed himself on top of the power core section on the TCD's back, he twisted the handle with his full strength on this right arm, attempting to release and pull out the power core.

The TCD caught this chance of Taylor focusing on the power core section, rotated its robotic arms backwards as well, and firmly grabbed Taylor on his back. With a sudden painful scream shooting through the rainy sky, the TCD threw Taylor away like a toy doll.

Taylor almost flew across the arena, and died immediately after landing on a tombstone far away.

"Woo..." Kevin, Susan, and Oliver exclaimed simultaneously.

"That's gonna hurt like hell." Kevin added after seeing Taylor's tragic death.

Meanwhile, Kobayashi was still driving madly, while shouting Taylor's name out of shock and fear. But there was no time for sorrow, Kobayashi knew that he had to finish the duel on Taylor's behalf.

The TCD managed to stand up again, but still plowing the ground with its metal feet. The dragging-around left considerable trails of dirt in the cemetery, like some children's doodle.

Kobayashi saw it stood up in the rearview mirror, he knew he didn't have much time left to stall. So Kobayashi slammed on the gas pedal, he towed the TCD to the cemetery admin building at the northwest corner of the volcanic crater.

At the turn, driving at his highest speed possible, Kobayashi suddenly hit the brake hard and performed a power drift, fishtailing the TCD in a circular trajectory in mid-air and smashed it onto the vine-covered admin building.

The TCD flew into one of the big window frames on the first floor, then Kobayashi slammed the gas pedal again while the TCD was temporarily knocked out, and pulled its power core out from the front panel that the harpoon hooked up tightly. The power core was a cylindrical object in the size of a 25-liter water container, shining with futuristic blue rays. The TCD was immediately demobilized after its power core was pulled out by the harpoon.

"Congratulations, Mr. Kobayashi, $36000 of duel reward has been credited to you!" The show hosts in the ABN studio congratulated Mr. Kobayashi to become the first winner of the Champion Duel during this season, but he didn't stop and celebrate his victory. Instead, he drove around the cemetery to find his fallen teammate, and warp-speeded away from the crater after seeing what's left of Mr. Taylor.

"That was challenging. Should we skip the duel? It's not that well-rewarded." Kevin doubted if they could defeat the TCD.

"I think it's worth a shot. There's no way that's a power core, it's way too small for such a droid." Susan concluded with confidence.

"Then what is it?" Oliver asked curiously.

"Looks like a telecom module of some sort. The TCD is remotely operated, so it needs this to receive commands from the operator." Susan explained with more clarity.

"Makes sense. These combat droids nowadays have modularized designs, they don't use centralized power modules anymore." Kevin agreed with Susan.

"If we acquire the 'power core', I mean the telecom module, perhaps we can use to transmit the files out of this island." Kevin added, with motive to challenge the duel.

"We're gonna need better strategies and equipments to defeat it." Oliver added his suggestion.

"So we go get a harpoon cannon too?" Kevin wondered.

"No need, I have a better plan. We can win this without casualty." Susan fired up her brilliant ivy-league mind and came up with a plan to tackle the duel.

"We could make some kind of electromagnetic[2] interference device. If we got some sort of signal emitter, I could make that happen by some modifications. And perhaps even reverse engineer it to patch through the signals of other teams' wristbands, so that we can see their locations and plan combats accordingly to our benefit." Susan suggested after Kevin gave a look to further elaborate her thoughts.

"Are you sure you can do that?" Oliver questioned Susan, but Kevin seemed to trust her judgments.

Without further adieu, Kevin found his old Starlink dish from the master bedroom, Susan went downstairs and gathered loads of electrical components from their previous loot.

They started working on building an EM interference device from scratch. But Susan seemed to have trouble bypassing the transmission security protocol of their wristbands.

"This thing has a quantum encryption for all out-going signals, I can't bypass it." Susan said, pointing to her wristband which she had dismantled apart.

[2] Later referred to as "EM" or "EMP".

"There's a...eh...some sort of quantum black box inside, no signal goes out without its signature. To extend this to exterior emitters, we need another such black box." Susan explained further in detail.

"Would the same parts from those dead guys' wristbands work?" Kevin asked.

"Maybe, worth a shot." Susan muttered with little confidence, but Kevin still let her try those blood-tainted smart wristbands.

It didn't work, those wristbands automatically self-destructed their critical internal components after their owners were eliminated. They (the three protagonists) were frustrated, but they did not give up.

Later that day, Kevin shot down a camera drone during the on-cam loot count. Eureka! Susan successfully implemented the modifications to her wristband with the parts from the camera drone. It didn't reveal the location of other contestants, but it did allow her wristband to patch into the incoming signals for all the camera drones. In addition, Susan also patched Oliver's wristband and headset into their common internal communication channel, so that they could talk to each other remotely.

Susan then reprogrammed her wristband to share this feed with Kevin's and Oliver's wristbands, so that now they can all see where all the drones are. And one could infer the locations of other contestants from the distribution and movements of the drones.

Furthermore, Susan also modified Kevin's old Starlink dish to be able to emit EM interference to temporarily demobilize the TCD and it can be controlled by her smart wristband.

National Memorial Cemetery — Wednesday, July 4th, 2046

The gloomy gray sky kept raining. After getting fully prepared, the three of them got up early next morning and headed for the National Memo-

rial Cemetery to challenge the Champion Duel. They drove two trucks, the EM interference device was attached to and powered by Kevin & Susan's truck, while Oliver drove his truck for creating physical interference to the TCD during the duel.

At 09:00 am local time, as the show started airing live, Kevin & Susan drove into the entrance of the cemetery.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Day 4! Yesterday, we lost Mr. Taylor during the duel, and then his teammate Mr. Kobayashi was eliminated by the ex-cons Mr. Levy & Mr. Rocklin later last night."

"Without further adieu, let's take a look at the new duel challengers — it's the BnB's!" Ed drew the audience's attention to the new situation on this day.

Back to Kevin & Susan at the cemetery, the TCD was standing still at the center of the central lawn, it seemed unpowered, looking like a shining statue.

"Are we supposed to wait for him to announce the rules or something?" Kevin wondered.

"No! What are you waiting for? Just go for it!" Susan hurried Kevin to just start the duel as the TCD suddenly powered on and rampaged towards their truck.

Kevin stomped on the gas pedal and took a sharp turn to his right-hand side, circling around the perimeter of the crater. The TCD quickly followed behind them, its arms split into heavy swords, radiating chilling gleams in all directions.

Kevin already brought his truck to maximal speed, but the TCD is still gradually closing in.

"Is the EMP ready?" Kevin yelled at Susan.

"Just a sec!" Susan emphasized as she hurried the initiation of the EM interference device.

"Oliver, we need you here!" Kevin called for Oliver's help through their internal communication channel.

At this moment, when the TCD is being distracted by Kevin & Susan, Oliver came into the arena from a hidden corner and chased up to tackle the TCD from the back.

"And here he comes, the third player in this team! Again, this kind of teaming-up is not technically prohibited but highly unrecommended." Rayner commented on their dueling configuration.

"EMP is online!" Susan shouted to notify Kevin and Oliver.

As soon as Susan finished her words, Kevin hit the brake hard and performed a power drift towards the left. Their truck came to a sudden stop, but the TCD didn't have to slow down its pace, neither did Oliver's truck (but he maintained his speed on purpose).

Driven by high inertia, the TCD hit Kevin's truck and then Oliver hit the TCD from its back immediately afterwards. Under tremendous momentum, the TCD flew over Kevin & Susan's truck, which was then knocked to roll over a round due to Oliver's high speed.

Right after the hit, Susan activated her EM interference device and pointed the Starlink dish directly towards the fallen TCD on her right-hand side. With a sound of electrical snort, the TCD seemed to have powered down.

"A massive collision! And the TCD is now irresponsive!" Rayner expressed his exclamation.

"Wow! That's like the least time-consuming duel we've seen so far." Jay added with his compliments.

It took Kevin a few seconds to recover from the rollover, then he got off the truck swiftly and rushed to the TCD. He jumped onto the TCD's back and started turning the handle of the power core section. The handle was stuck pretty tight, perhaps the maintenance crew intentionally made it so after yesterday's duel (in which the power core was ripped off by simply pulling it hard with a harpoon), or maybe it just got shrunk due to the change in weather and temperature.

As Kevin enforced his full strength on the TCD, a round of bullet shower suddenly came from far away, hit the TCD and the lawn around it. They were actually aiming for Kevin, but he fell behind the TCD on time and successfully dodged those bullets without getting hit. The bullets scratched off the metal armor, glaring sparks in the rain, but it left almost no damage to the TCD.

Then they turned their fire on Kevin & Susan's truck as Kevin quickly crawled back to it. Kevin kept his body low, crawled around the truck and got back to the driver seat.

Meanwhile, inside the truck, Susan was severely spooked by the unexpected gunshots from the interfering contestants and held her head low on the front passenger seat. The bullets landed on the exterior shell on the right-hand side of the truck, making loud noises and also broke one of the back-row windows. Fortunately, the bullets did not go through the external shell of the truck since it had been reinforced for combat before the loot began.

"What the hell was that?!!" Kevin & Susan simultaneously questioned out of deep shock.

"Unexpected intruders to the duel! Contestants Natalie Cortes and Victor Martinez are now disqualified for using firearm in the arena during

the duel. All remaining contestants may hunt them for a bounty of $72000!" Rayner announced the ruling for Cortes & Martinez's actions to all surviving contestants.

"You f**king idiot! What the hell were you thinking?! Look what you did! We're fugitives now!" Cortes the driver slammed her hands on the steering wheel in frustration and cursed her teammate Martinez for firing his rifle at the TCD.

"I thought the duel was over, he was retrieving the power core." Martinez argued for his reckless actions.

Meanwhile, Kevin & Susan's truck was also interfered by the EMP they emitted earlier. As Kevin was trying to reboot their truck, the TCD powered on again and got up on its metal feet, it seemed pissed off. Meanwhile, a crowd of zombies were drawn to the cemetery and swarmed in towards the contestants in the duel.

"Hurry up guys! We got company!" Oliver yelled hysterically.

"Now enters the herd of zombies, we also got a furious droid, and two teams, technically three teams of players challenging the duel! How gladiatorial is this duel?!" Ed exclaimed.

"The best one I've seen so far, to be honest." Jay agreed with Ed.

"Holy shit!" Kevin briefly lifted his head and said, seeing the zombies running towards them, while Cortes & Martinez crashed into the TCD and knocked it down again.

This time, the TCD stood up quickly, it's intimidating physique shadowed upon Cortes & Martinez's front windshield. Cortes & Martinez turned their truck around out of fear and headed back towards the cemetery's entrance.

The TCD followed behind Cortes & Martinez as they rushed into the zombie crowd, and Martinez opened fire again to clear out a way through the zombies.

"Turn off your engine!" Kevin told Oliver to shut down his truck, suspecting that the zombies were not only drawn by the noise but also drawn by the EM pulse. Oliver complied and shut down his engine, while Kevin signaled both of them (Susan & Oliver) to be quiet.

Soon, they watched the zombies turned around and headed back towards the direction of Cortes & Martinez. However, the TCD stopped them from escaping the arena from its only entrance (which is also the only exit). The TCD stood in front of their truck, raised both of its arms and attempted to smash Cortes & Martinez's front hood with its alloy fists.

Cortes & Martinez backed their truck on time, the TCD's fists only scratched their front hood a little. Then Cortes took a hard left turn and started circling the volcanic crater right on its edges. The TCD closely followed behind them as Cortes & Martinez sped up, they could both fall down the hill any moment since there was no fence at the edges.

Oliver watched them came back and approached his position after a half round. The crowd of zombies ran from far away trying to catch up, but they were too slow comparing to the trucks and the TCD.

"Cortes & Martinez are coming around, Swinton and the BnB's are still just watching." Rayner commented the scene.

Kevin & Susan wanted to wait until Cortes & Martinez have significantly stalled or damaged the TCD, then swoop in and tackle the TCD. However, Oliver had a different idea.

When Cortes & Martinez approached the crater edge near Oliver, he immediately rebooted his truck and rushed up the ramp. Oliver was

actually aiming for Cortes & Martinez, he wanted to knock them out of the edges, kill them during the fall and get some bounty money from this. But Cortes & Martinez went too fast, Oliver missed them, but he did hit the TCD instead and knocked the TCD out of the crater edge.

"Swinton rebooted his truck, and here he comes!" Rayner raised his voice.

The TCD fell like a giant doll and rolled down the hill. The downhill slope was cover by gravels and rocks. Metal parts were knocked off from the TCD as it splashed on the gravels and rocks during the fall, making loud and grating metallic noises. Eventually, the TCD smashed onto a big hard rock at half way up the hill, it (the TCD) flew for a short distance in mid-air and fell down hard onto a obelisk-shaped monumental statue by the road down the hill.

"Bang! The TCD lost its balance and fell down the hill!" Jay picked up the line.

The TCD landed on the side of the Prospect St, broken into pieces. Kevin & Susan finally rebooted their truck as Oliver lead the way towards the cemetery's entrance.

"The TCD smashed into pieces, but the core is still intact, who will get to it first? And will it split up the 'illegal' three-player team? Let's find out!" Ed added after Jay and Rayner.

"Come on! They're gonna snatch our prize!" Oliver shouted out loud, pointing to the back view of Cortes & Martinez leaving the cemetery from its only entrance.

Kevin and Oliver slammed on their gas pedals simultaneously, in attempt to catch up with Cortes & Martinez and beat them to the fallen TCD.

Unfortunately, Cortes & Martinez was faster since their truck was lighter, so they took a shortcut down the hill at the Puowaina Dr and picked up the TCD's power core before Kevin and Oliver got there.

On the other hand, Kevin and Oliver's trucks were heavier (loaded with more loot, weapons, and equipments), so they didn't take the risk of driving directly down the hill through that shortcut. After all, heavier trucks might lose balance doing so.

"Cortes took a bold shortcut down the hill! They made it! They got the power core and they are running away." Rayner continued his comments on the scene.

"The $36000 duel bonus remains untaken, plus the $72000 fugitive bounty, all out there for the taking!" Rayner added.

When Kevin and Oliver made it to the scattered wreckage of the TCD, as they expected, the power core has already been taken. Following the fresh tire prints over the mud-covered road, Kevin and Oliver drove to their fastest in order to get their power core back from Cortes & Martinez.

"Perhaps they didn't think straight under adrenaline, and now a car-chase has begun!" Jay answered Rayner's question and continued his comments.

"Fugitives Cortes & Martinez are slowing down due to the messy barricades on the streets, but the BnB's and Swinton followed up quickly. Now the BnB's are also taking shortcuts, the local folk knows his way!" Rayner narrated as several camera drones filmed the car-chase (in a third-person perspective) from high above the streets.

Moments later, Kevin, Oliver, and Cortes all drove their trucks onto the H-1 freeway, heading northwest as the circle (the boundary of the loot zone) shifted (towards the northwest) behind them.

Martinez stuck his head and arms out from the right front window of their truck, he pointed his AR-15 at Kevin & Susan and started shooting at them. Bullets showered upon Kevin & Susan's truck, they put their down under the dashboard, and their front windshield cracked with bullet holes over it. The front hood on Kevin & Susan's truck also got hit and started pumping white smoke, blocking their front view.

"Shoot them back!" Kevin asked Susan to open fire at Cortes & Martinez.

"I can't, too shaky and smoky, bad aim!" Susan complained the Kevin's shaky driving after shot a round of bullets at Cortes & Martinez.

"Take the wheel, keep it straight!" Kevin asked Susan to lean over and take his steering wheel, while Kevin stuck his upper body outside the left front window and kept his feet on the gas pedal. Kevin shot at Cortes & Martinez's truck with much better precision and a more professional aiming pose.

"I can't see the road!" Susan screamed, fearing for crashing the truck.

"Follow the holo-map!" Kevin yelled back while shooting upfront.

Susan turned on the HUD in the vehicle and projected the off-line map from her wristband onto the in-vehicle HUD. The HUD was constantly blinking as the windshield glass was broken, but it was still hanging there and showing the routes for Susan to follow along.

Being blinded from the real-world scenery, Susan controlled the direction of the truck by following the holographic map on the HUD. They drove along the H-1 freeway to the northwest, with Oliver following closely behind Kevin & Susan.

After a few rounds of ammo, Kevin hit multiple critical parts of Cortes & Martinez's truck. He took out their rear window and side mirrors,

suppressed Martinez's barbarous shooting, flattened their rear tires and forced their truck to deviate from the H-1 freeway.

"They are closing in towards the northwest border of the loot zone. They cannot go much further!" Rayner narrated to the audience.

"Hard right!" Kevin told Susan to take a hard right with the steering wheel. Kevin got back inside and slammed harder on the gas pedal, while Susan turned the steering wheel to a hard right. Their truck hit Cortes & Martinez's truck hard on the rear end and knocked it over.

Bishop Museum — Wednesday, July 4th, 2046

Both trucks rolled over for several rounds after hitting a fence and some other minor obstacles on the ground next to the H-1 freeway lanes. Kevin & Susan and Cortes & Martinez crash-exited the H-1 freeway and into the Bishop Museum[3] on the right-hand side of the H-1 freeway.

"Bundy performed a PIT[4] on Cortes, and they both crashed into the Bishop Museum!" Rayner shouted out excitingly.

Meanwhile, the overhead drones captured footage of Cortes & Martinez getting off their truck like a blitz and entered the Hawaiian Hall Complex[5] under the cover of their bullets pouring on Kevin & Susan's truck across the opaque white smokes from their damaged front hood.

"Swinton caught up to the scene after the car-crash, but the crossfire had already begun!" Ed narrated after Rayner.

The main entrance (on the south side of the building) to the Hawaiian Hall Complex was completely blocked by the two trucks, both are

[3]Also known as the "Hawaii State Museum of Natural History".

[4]Abbreviation for "Precision Immobilization Technique": a controlled driving tactic used by law enforcement to end high-speed pursuits by causing a fleeing vehicle to turn sideways, resulting in a spin-out and controlled stop.

[5]See Figure VII.8 for a map of the Bishop Museum campus.

beyond repair and could explode any minute. Kevin & Susan couldn't enter the Hawaiian Hall Complex through the main entrance.

Kevin & Susan got off their wrecked truck, grabbed their tactical gears and a bag of critical loot. Pieces of loot (including the classified hard drive) and debris scattered all over the trucks and the ground near them, Kevin & Susan had tried to retrieve as much critical loot as they could from the scene. However, among the chaos and high tension of the car-crash scene, one of the camera drones still captured the image of the classified hard drive before Kevin & Susan could hide it again.

After gathering up their critical loot (including the classified hard drive) hastily under enemy fire power, Kevin & Susan immediately went around the building and found an employee entrance on the east side of the Hawaiian Hall Complex.

Meanwhile, the black-suited government liaison in the ABN studio clearly saw this in the unaired live feed from one of the monitors, and he had ordered the program producers not to air these images (of the classified hard drive) until further notice.

Moments later, a call was made, leaving Kevin & Susan in big trouble. "They found something there, looks like an old hard drive, with our seal on it." The government liaison said emotionlessly during the call to his superior officer at the DoD.

"Try negotiation first, paying them off." A calm old male voice came from the other side of the phone call.

"Understood, sir." Said the government liaison.

Back to the island of O'ahu, Oliver arrived later at the scene, with his truck almost intact after the car-chase. Kevin & Susan signaled him to park on the eastern side and grab his tactical gears.

"Go around and see if you can find another entrance on the north, we'll boxed them in." Kevin ordered Oliver to separate from them and find another way in, so that the three of them could establish a tactical advantage by enveloping the enemies.

"They all went inside the Hawaiian Hall Complex! Is Swinton gonna help the BnB's again or betray them in this chaos?! We'll soon find out after getting our camera drones inside the building." Jay picked up the line after Ed.

At the Bishop Museum, Kevin & Susan silently stepped towards the Hawaiian Hall through the employee entrance. They stopped at a broken door next to the Hawaiian Hall, Kevin held up his fist, signaling Susan to stop right here. Then Kevin pulled out the tactical endoscope on his AR-15 and stuck it out to check their perimeter.

Video feed from the endoscope came in, rain water and faint daylight leaked into the hall through the rectangular central skylight (roof window). The Hawaiian Hall was four stories tall, the air smelled like a mixture of mold and decay, while the chilling breezes brought that smell to the contestants in the dark.

Inside the hall, a mammoth skeleton standing at the center of the hall, still standing tall and proud like it had been millions of years ago. A taxidermied gray whale was hanging overhead, smiling gloomily under its rusted hanging cables. Some smaller stuffed animal specimens also hanged or scattered in the hall, decorating a realm of dead animals that creeps people out.

There seemed to be nothing alive in the hall, so Kevin signaled Susan to turn off their flashlight as he got ready to move in quietly. Before pushing into the hall, Kevin also checked his modified wristband for the positions of drones around him.

"Watch out the third floor corridor on 2 o'clock." Kevin whispered to alert Susan, pointing at the two stand-alone camera drone signals on the third floor.

"I'm in. What's next?" Oliver called in his position to Kevin.

"Stay put, I'll create a distraction. Push in on my mark." Kevin checked Oliver's position, and instructed him to push in on cue.

Kevin signaled Susan to stay put at the employee entrance and provide cover for him as he enters the hall. Then Kevin grasped the camera drone filming behind him and ran into the hall. He crouched behind the display cases in the hall, and hopped between them one by one, pushing towards the west.

When Kevin made it to half way across the hall, shots were fired upon him from the northwest corner on the third floor corridor. Kevin swiftly threw the drone out as distraction, and took cover behind one of the display cases.

After hearing the shots, Susan immediately opened fire at the third floor corridor. Although she didn't hit the fugitives Cortes & Martinez, she didn't have to, she had created enough distraction for Kevin.

Kevin caught the moment where Cortes & Martinez were interrupted by Susan's bullets, he mounted his AR-15 on the display case and fired back. While Susan reloaded her rifle, Kevin sprayed his ammo towards the third floor to cover himself moving towards the next display case.

Martinez fired back at him as Kevin moved between the display cases, and he asked Cortes to go around to form a pincer attack. Cortes ran eastwards on the third floor corridor, and Kevin shot at him behind the next display case, peeking through a blind spot of Martinez's line of sight. Cortes also fired back at Kevin, the intense crossfire lit up the hall.

The taxidermies caught in their crossfire, bullets scraped through the mammoth skeleton and the taxidermied gray whale. Scraps of mammoth bones and ivory flew across the hall and splashed everywhere, while one of the hanging cables of the gray whale broke off and the tail-side of the 50-foot-long (about 15 meters) gray whale fell down heavily from above. The gray whale leaned in mid-air, with its tail touching the floor and its head still hanging high above via the remaining hanging cable.

Kevin swiftly rolled over to dodge the falling gray whale tail. While doing so, he got injured by the broken glasses, shattered bone scraps, and other debris laid on the floor.

"Could use some help now, O. Mind your steps!" Kevin called Oliver for support. As Kevin spoke, Oliver immediately pushed into the Pacific Hall (located at the far northwest part of the Hawaiian Hall Complex) and quietly marched towards the crossfire he heard.

Meanwhile, Kevin opened fire again to cover Susan's move, she crossed the hall screaming, and safely reached the stairwell across the hall from Kevin. Now Susan is in Martinez's blind spot, but Cortes had came around and formed a pincer attack.

Susan was lucky enough to made it into the stairwell and hid behind the fire door. Kevin told her to stay put through his headset, but Martinez has realized their plan. Martinez turned around and went to guard the stairwell, while Cortes guarded the middle court on the other side.

Kevin panted heavily behind the display case, his brain was spinning faster than ever. Under this desperate situation, he had to either come up with a way to break through, or take a huge risk and just rush all the way in.

"What now?!" Susan asked Kevin and Oliver through her headset.

"I'm almost in position! The drones are blocking all exits!" Oliver reported back.

"What?! Stay put for now, O. Do not expose yourself!" Kevin ordered Oliver to stand by.

Kevin then looked up at the skylight on top of the middle court of the hall, hundreds of drones surrounded the entire building and covered all possible exits. It is a siege, intentionally arranged for enforcing a bloodbath.

The faint daylight was gone, replaced by artificial illumination from the drones. Everyone in the museum was dazzled and covered their eyes for a moment when the drones turned their lights to maximal power.

When they lowered their arms and adapted to the new lighting, an alarming male voice arose in Kevin & Susan's headsets: "Listen up, folks. We know about the hard drive you found. Let's make a deal." The government liaison contacted Kevin & Susan via a private communication channel.

"Kind of busy here!" Kevin replied impatiently as Cortes strafed at Kevin's position after hearing his complaining talk.

Kevin crawled a bit further backwards, so Cortes didn't hit him. Kevin stared at the bullet holes not far from his feet, and the government liaison's voice came again in his headset: "Sign an NDA and bring the hard drive back safely, otherwise you'll never return to civilization. You have until midnight to make a decision."

Afterwards, a few drones flew in and pointed their lights at Kevin, like the spotlights on a stage. Clearly, this act is to expose him in danger. Kevin knew he had to take the risk and break through, he shot at the spotlight drones with his AR-15 and ran away from behind the display case.

"Go f**k yourselves!" Kevin yelled at the government liaison in his headset.

"Cover me, Su!" Kevin asked for Susan's help. He then grabbed another camera drone and threw it at Cortes while engaging in the crossfire.

Kevin ran pretty fast, and made it to the stairwell safely thanks to Susan's cover-fire. Kevin pushed Susan back as he entered the fire door, one of the bullets scraped the edge of Susan's left-foot shoe.

"Shit! That was close!" Susan exclaimed in shock. Kevin got up quickly and helped Susan to get back up. They reloaded their weapons and started climbing upstairs.

"We are coming up, get behind them, O." Kevin told Oliver (in a whispering voice) to start push forward and approach Cortes & Martinez from their back in order to box them in.

Oliver moved in silence, step by step, he couldn't afford to make a sound and expose his position.

Kevin & Susan stomped to the second floor platform in the stairwell, while Cortes & Martinez guarded the stairwell at the third floor fire door.

Kevin & Susan then stopped there as Martinez shot downwards through the central gap between the stairs. The clinking and clanking of the handrails getting hit by bullets echoed across the stairwell, arousing fear and made them stop.

Kevin signaled Susan to stall them here by talking, while he took a detour to another stairwell at the northeast corner of the second floor.

"Care to talk?" Susan yelled at Cortes & Martinez.

"You ain't getting any bonus today! So back off, or die!" Martinez replied in anger.

"If we work together, we could all get out of here alive! Just hand over the core, there is no need for killing." Susan responded with a tiny bit of threatening in her tone.

"No f**king way!" Martinez made his statement loud and clear.

"Is that how you tricked the third guy? That's right, we saw the other truck!" Cortes followed up after Martinez's words.

As they spoke across the stairwell, Kevin already sneaked to the other stairwell and went up to the fourth floor.

Kevin then quietly approached the middle court of the Hawaiian Hall on the fourth floor. The swarm of drones humming above the roof covered Kevin's footsteps.

Meanwhile, Susan was still on the second floor platform in the main stairwell, Oliver was quietly standing by on the third floor hallway connecting the Pacific Hall to the Hawaiian Hall, and Martinez waved Cortes off to guard their back at the east-end of the third corridor (connecting to the other stairwell, where Kevin took a detour).

Breath thickens on both sides, another round of crossfire is about to be triggered. Suddenly, Kevin jumped over the corridor fence on the fourth floor and tangled the only stable hanging cable on the gray whale's head with his arms. He slid down the hanging cable and swung to the third floor corridor.

Kevin landed on Cortes's back, caught her on surprise, kicked her and knocked her down instantly.

With Kevin's legs strangling Cortes on her neck, she choked hard, then reached to her rifle on the side and started firing wildly.

That was the signal of attack. Susan moved upstairs fast, while Martinez was spooked by Cortes's sudden movements and turned around to help her.

Kevin dragged Cortes behind the wall when Martinez turned around and fired at him, he continued the strangle move.

Susan came up to the third floor, shot at Martinez when he was aiming at Kevin. She hit his rifle and his arm, but Martinez was not severely injured.

Martinez ran back to the Pacific Hall, pulled out his pistol and held his wound on the left arm as his blood started pumping out.

Meanwhile, Cortes emptied her mag during the wild shooting, but she didn't hit anyone. Cortes couldn't reload, she tried to reach for her pistol, but her breath fainted and her strength faded away.

Susan ran to Kevin's position to help him, but he had done the choking work there. "Go get the other one! Go help Oliver!" Kevin said anxiously, pointing his eyes towards the west-end of the corridor.

A few seconds after Susan turned around and headed the other way, a single gunshot sounded off from Kevin's pistol, marking the death of Natalie Cortes.

"Bang! The bounty is half way there! Are they gonna seize this opportunity to pay off those damaged drones, or will Martinez live to fight another day?" Rayner remarked excitingly as the camera drones followed Martinez to the Pacific Hall.

"He's heading to you!" Kevin warned Oliver about the incoming enemy.

But they forgot one thing, they never handed Oliver his guns back! As a result, Oliver had to fall back to a corner at the water fountain, where he held a fire extinguisher and waited to ambush Martinez.

Martinez's rifle was dead, so he shut the two fire doors connecting the Pacific Hall and the Hawaiian Hall, then clamped the fire doors with his dead rifle to keep Kevin & Susan outside. He ran towards the emergency exit on the northwest corner of the Pacific Hall.

As Kevin & Susan took a detour to the second floor through the main stairwell, Martinez passed the water fountain and got ambushed by Oliver. Oliver jumped out and hit Martinez with a fire extinguisher, knocked out Martinez's pistol away.

But the fire extinguisher was too heavy, Oliver didn't have to chance to swing it back before Martinez grabbed his (Oliver's) arms and hit back with his big fists. As a school teacher, Oliver did not have the physique to beat Martinez in a fistfight.

Oliver and Martinez grappled with each other, but Martinez soon overwhelmed over Oliver. He (Martinez) broke free and attempted to reach for his pistol on the side, but Oliver swiftly got up on his feet and squelched Martinez by tackling him from his beneath.

Oliver pinned down Martinez's legs from behind, then they both lost balance and fell down to the first floor of the Pacific Hall. They landed in a fenced area of sandbox at the middle court of the Pacific Hall, with dinosaur fossils surrounding them.

A T-Rex skeleton still standing like the king of nature that once ruled the earth. Next to its gaping maw, laid a triceratops with a choking pose under the T-Rex's monstrous biting pose. A few pterosaur skeletons hover above the scene, as if they were witnessing the latest gladiators at this long-forgotten ancient battleground.

After some intense wrestling, Oliver almost drowned under Martinez's superior strength. Martinez picked up one of the claws detached from the T-Rex skeleton and pushed this 65-million-year-old blade towards Oliver's throat.

As Oliver choked and attempted to restrain Martinez's execution pose, Kevin & Susan barged into the Pacific Hall from the second floor. Just when Martinez is about to stab the T-Rex claw into Oliver's neck, Kevin took a decisive shot and blew up Martinez's head, precise and deadly.

Now the two fugitives are both dead, Rayner announced the award of bonus money to Kevin & Susan: "Congrats to the BnB's for winning both the fugitives' bounty and the Champion Duel rewards. Their third 'teammate' is not an officially recognized team member, thus he didn't get anything out of this battle, even after risking his life to help defeat Martinez without his firearms."

Clearly, Rayner said this out loud to provoke Oliver to betray Kevin & Susan at this vulnerable hour. But Oliver never had such thoughts, he was just glad to be alive.

Having built enough trust with each other through the battle of the Bishop Museum, Kevin & Susan thanked Oliver for his bravery and returned Oliver's weapons to him.

Additionally, Kevin & Susan also offered their sincere apology for neglecting Oliver's absence of firearms during and before the museum combat.

After gathering up Cortes & Martinez's leftover loot, Kevin, Susan, and Oliver also spent some time to scavenge through the Bishop Museum for some valuable artifacts.

It was already late afternoon when they finished their loot at the Bishop Museum, the swarm of drones blocking all the exits and entrances had

retreated. So the three of them left there in Oliver's truck, they desperately needed a decent place to rest after a long day of fierce violence.

Thus the three of them drove to the Honolulu Towing Firm at 933 Owen St, where they parked their truck inside the garage and reorganized themselves.

At night, they repaired their only remaining truck with spare parts and tools left at the towing firm. Then they spent the rest of their night hiding there, preparing for another day of adventure. Moreover, they also seriously thought about what the government liaison said to them earlier that day.

Chapter V

Wanted on the Run

Midnight at Honolulu Towing Firm — Thursday, July 5th, 2046

"You can't back down now! This has to go out!" Oliver firmly stated after Kevin & Susan showed him the contents of the hard drive.

"Even if you compromise now, they could still disappear you once you get out of this island. And me too, now that we are on the same boat." Oliver added.

Meanwhile, at the ABN television studio in Seattle, the government liaison reported to his superior officer at the DoD: "Sir, they are not buying it."

"Eradicate them, but keep the fun." The DoD officer ordered through the phone call.

Moments later, a special bounty was issued on the show: a million dollars will be rewarded to any contestant who eliminates Kevin Bundy & Susan Bing and safely retrieves the classified hard drive without looking into it.

"The offer extends to you as well, Mr. Swinton. Be a smart man and choose wisely." The government liaison called Oliver in private, alluding him to sell out Kevin & Susan.

However, the three of them at the towing firm had already patched through their communication channels, so Kevin & Susan also heard that "private call" to Oliver.

The three of them stared at each other in silence, Kevin quietly put his hand next to the pistol holster on the side of his pants. Due to some remaining skepticism, Kevin suspected that Oliver might take the liaison's offer and ambush them for the bounty. After all, a million dollars is a very tempting reward for anyone on this island of desperation, and elsewhere as well.

"No no no, I would never do that!" Oliver said as he put down his weapons on the floor and kicked them over to Kevin.

Kevin raised his pistol swiftly and pointed it at Oliver as soon as he saw Oliver touched his weapons, it was an act of precaution.

"Woh, calm down!" Susan tried to persuade Kevin to lower his pistol.

After seeing Oliver voluntarily handed over his weapons, Kevin finally put his pistol down.

"Sorry, I'm too paranoid." Kevin apologized to Oliver & Susan.

"Now we must plan for tomorrow. As soon as the show starts airing at 09:00 am, everyone else is gonna hunt us down." Kevin warned Oliver & Susan.

"So what's the plan on your mind?" Susan asked both of them.

"If we can't run from it, then we must bring the fight to somewhere in our benefit." Oliver added.

"Exactly, somewhere we can control the situation." Kevin said.

"What about the dock?" Susan suggested, pointing at the Kapālama pier on the holographic map on their truck.

"There's no leeway at the dock, the sand island is only one way in and out, and it's probably gonna be outside the circle by tomorrow morning." Kevin vetoed Susan's suggestion in a reasonable manner.

"How about we use the Champion Duel to stall them? They will be force to drop the firearms." Kevin suggested, pointing at the new duel site at the Keehi Lagoon Beach Park.

"You think they care about the duel rules when there's a million dollars on your heads?" Oliver argued rhetorically.

"Yeah, fair point." Susan agreed with Oliver.

"I would pick the airport terminal." Oliver suggested and pointed at Terminal #2 of the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (**HNL**).

"Look here, you have leeway to retreat, the building it self is large enough and its interior is complicated enough to stall their push. And, the surveillance cameras might still work." Oliver successfully sold this idea to Kevin & Susan.

"I can try to reboot the airport's system. With the solar panels all over the roof, there should be enough power for the security cameras, and perhaps something more than that." Susan added confidently.

"Good plan. But there are still seven enemy teams left, we should expect five of them to hit us tomorrow. If we make it through tomorrow, the remaining teams might ambush us at the exfil." Kevin noted with a heavy voice.

"Take your weapons back. You and I have to handle the shooting tomorrow." Kevin said to Oliver as he handed Oliver's weapons back to him.

"Susan, you stay at the control room and monitor the cameras, wherever that is. Put all your wristbands on me, so that they can't track you guys. If I fall or die, you run away asap[1]. We leave by sunrise." Kevin briefed Susan & Oliver about the rough strategic plans for Day 5.

Sunrise at HNL Terminal #2 — Thursday, July 5th, 2046

The rain that kept pouring for two days had finally stopped on the morning of Day 5. With the beeping noise of the tracking signals from their wristbands (all on Kevin's arm), Kevin, Susan, and Oliver arrived at the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (**HNL**).

Susan got off the car earlier and headed for the central control room of the terminal building, while Kevin parked the truck in a hidden maintenance tunnel.

Kevin and Oliver got off the truck, they were fully geared-up and their guns were fully loaded. Water drips from the dark ceiling dropped on them and the ground, making unsettling dripping noises.

They enter the main structure of the terminal building through an employee-only entrance. Suddenly, the lights were turned on across the building with a constantly humming noise.

Along with the lights, the broadcast audio system was also rebooted by Susan, and an old evacuation announcement was automatically played in maximal volume.

The loud broadcast audio echoed all over the terminal building: "Dear travelers, all out-bound flights have been canceled due to a state of emer-

[1]Abbreviation for "as soon as possible".

gency. Please remain calm and stand by for further notice. Please do not leave the terminal building until instructed to. Thank you for your patience and cooperation."

"Susan, turn it off!" Kevin covered his ears and told Susan to turn off the annoyingly loud broadcast.

Silence returned soon. Kevin and Oliver settled in at the first atrium on the second floor of the east wing of the terminal building. They each guarded one entrance into the building, Kevin squatted down behind a fenced flower bed at the Starbucks, while Oliver hid in a public restroom.

Meanwhile, in the central control room in the Inouye tower, Susan overwatched the movements of camera drones near the airport and surveyed their surrounding with her binoculars.

Due to the airport broadcast audio earlier, thousands of zombies were woken up. Susan has remotely lowered some of the roller fire shutters and trapped the zombies in a designated area at the central court of the terminal building. This was a part of their plan against the bounty-hunting enemies.

The clock was ticking, hearts were pounding hard. As the time approached 09:00 am Honolulu local time, the show started airing on ABN entertainments and the hosts announced the beginning of a brand new day on *The Daring Loot*.

After a short briefing of the status updates about the DoD bounty on Kevin & Susan's lives, Rayner raised the audience's enthusiasm to a climax. As six of the seven remaining enemy teams (excluding Kevin, Susan, and Oliver) gathered around the airport perimeter, a thrilling "never-seen-before" battle is about to embark at one of the largest island airports in the world.

"It's about to get real hot in there! Are you ready, looters?!" Rayner's opening line sounded the battle horn for the contestants at HNL.

The enemy teams entered the building through different entrances and approached Kevin & Oliver from multiple directions. They are temporarily allying with each other, and pushing fast towards Kevin & Oliver's location.

The first ones to engage in the crossfire were D. Kim & E. Batalha, the couple of influencers. They came through the security checkpoint on the north. Meanwhile, Kevin was peeking through the tactical endoscope on his rifle.

"Here they go! Kim & Batalha the influencers are rushing in!" Rayner shouted out loud.

Suddenly, Kevin stood up and fired at the fire pipe above them as Kim & Batalha passed through under a roller fire shutter.

"Woh, watch the waterfall!" Ed commented.

The water inside the pipe sprinkled out and poured upon Kim & Batalha, caused them to slip and fall on the floor. Accidental discharge were fired from Kim & Batalha's weapons when they fell, some of which hit the glass fences and the shop signage at the Starbucks as Kevin crouched down to dodge the shots. Then Susan immediately lowered the roller fire shutter, it crashed onto Batalha's back and trapped her in a slit.

"Oh dear, that's gonna hurt!" Jay picked up the line.

Afterwards, Kevin immediately got up behind the flower bed and popped Kim's head off as Batalha was still in shock from the sudden drop of the roller fire shutter. Moments later, Oliver came out from the restroom and ended Batalha's life with a random strafe.

"And third guy ambushed them from the restroom! It seems like we have some sort of tracking-fraud here, because all the wristband signals are at the Starbucks, but according to the latest drone footage we can clearly see that there's only Bundy at the coffee shop." Rayner explained the situation to everyone on the show.

"Is this against the rules? Should they be disqualified?" Ed asked in doubt, this time he spoke much slower than before.

"Ehh……hold on……" Rayner hesitated, while the live footage from the action scene was cut off.

"My apologies for the delay, the production team just briefed me on this situation. Indeed it's a first, we've never thought someone would be able to unlock their wristband and take it off during the loot[2]. This is an oversight of our prop team, so no penalty will be place on the contestants at the moment." Rayner explained again regarding the tracking-fraud situation.

The death of the two influencers devastated their followers/fans, but it also made some of them rich from the bets they placed on the official website of *The Daring Loot*.

"Here comes the second wave of attacks! We have Moore & Smith and the newlyweds Ochoa & Chan!" Rayner again narrated excitingly.

Without further adieu, the second and third team approached the scene from the east gate and the first floor (respectively) as Kevin & Oliver reloaded their rifles.

"Susan, we need the noise! Turn the audio back on!" Kevin needed the loud broadcast audio back for causing distraction to their enemies.

[2]It was supposed to be tightly locked before they entered the playground.

Susan immediately complied, she turned the audio to maximal volume and played some pop songs she found left in the broadcast system computer.

That was a smart move, it bought them some time to relocate themselves. Keep changing spots is crucial in combat.

"And on the other side, we have more bounty-hunters caught up in cross-fire, not with the wanted BnB's, but with each other!" Jay drew the attention to the other half of the battleground: Lee & Padrov, Barone & Clebsch, and the ex-cons Levy & Rocklin were entangled in their own fight near the central court (where Susan trapped the zombies with lowered roller fire shutters).

As Harry Styles' *Sign of the Times* came from the speakers and sounded off across the terminal building, Kevin & Oliver pushed westwards under each other's cover. They moved with their bodies low, hid behind barriers whenever there is one, and shot back at the possible directions where the enemies might come from.

During their move to the west wing, Kevin even used a dinning table (taken from a restaurant next to the Starbucks) as some sort of shield. Meanwhile, as the Moore & Smith and Ochoa & Chan chased Kevin, Oliver took a detour through the employee entrances in the terminal building.

On the other side, while Barone & Clebsch and Lee & Padrov were strangled in a cross-fire of each other, Levy & Rocklin took the chance of the chaos and used a handheld grenade launcher to blow up the roller fire shutters trapping the zombies. The zombies stormed out as Levy & Rocklin sneaked away from the scene and headed for where Kevin was located, while Barone & Clebsch were given quite a scare. They (Barone & Clebsch) failed to escape the wave of undead on time and unfortu-

nately Barone got bitten by one of the zombies, and Lee & Padrov were wise to swiftly escape from the airport during that period of horror.

However, neither of them (Barone & Clebsch and Lee & Padrov) died on site that day. Instead, they found two separate ways to extract from the airport and headed elsewhere, awaiting further competition. As the exfil day getting closer and closer, some contestants are turning less bold to risk for more fortune.

"Whoops, zombies out! And killers are pushing towards Kevin fast! Looks like he's gonna get boxed in!" Rayner narrated on the live show.

Meanwhile, Kevin found a temporarily secure location at a clothes shop next to a boba cafe at the atrium skybridge.

"They are coming! Watch the escalators!" Susan reminded Kevin and Oliver of the enemies' position.

Kevin grabbed a mannequin from the clothes shop and pushed its upper body outwards (towards Kevin's right hand side). Ochoa shot at the mannequin as he approached the second floor on the escalator (on Kevin's side of the terminal building), while Kevin immediately peeked and shot back at Ochoa right on his head.

"Woh! Excellent timing!" Ed commented on the live show.

After Ochoa was killed, Chan rushed out from the escalator on the other side of the terminal building and rushed crazily towards Kevin. She poured random scattering shots at Kevin's clothes shop, so he had to move quickly to hide behind the checkout counter. Before Chan could kill Kevin, Oliver peeked from the roof and shot at Chan through the glass ceiling of the atrium, but he missed. Nevertheless, Chan was severely startled and fell over like a child, then she moved aside to the boba cafe instantly.

Hiding under the kitchen counter at the boba cafe, Chan is safe from Kevin and Oliver's lines of fire. However, a grenade came out of nowhere and landed in the boba cafe. The grenade was actually launched by Rocklin, one of the ex-cons sneaking behind on the third floor.

After killing Chan neatly with a grenade, Rocklin turned his gun at Kevin, while Levy headed upstairs to the rood. Unfortunately, Kevin didn't dodge Rocklin's surprise shots on time. Kevin's left leg was hit by Rocklin's rifle bullets when he (Kevin) was moving further into the back of the clothes shop (in order to avoid Rocklin's line of fire), and his rifle was also damaged by the surprised attack from above. Kevin gritted his teeth against the great pain on his leg and dragged himself behind a metal shelf.

"Oliver! Watch out!" Susan suddenly yelled out in their internal communication channel.

On the other side, Levy suddenly stormed out from the roof-top exit behind Oliver. Despite Susan's reminder, Oliver did not react on time. Levy shot him in the chest and the head, then his body fell onto the atrium skybridge through the broken glass ceiling.

"Don't come after me...You have to...get the hard drive out...safely....." Oliver said to Kevin & Susan with his last breath.

"Nooo!!! Oliver!!! Nooo!!!" Susan screamed out loud crying, covering her face with both hands, and her pupils enlarged in grief and anger.

"Now Kevin is wounded and stranded behind, in absence of his friends, what is the ex-cons' next move gonna be?" Jay added on the narrator's seat.

As the narrators spoke, Kevin was having a flashback behind the metal shelf. Kevin's hearing was temporarily lost due to the intense shooting

and bombing (of the grenades), the echoing music and the noise of the whizzing bullets gradually faded away in his senses, all he could hear was his own heartbeat.

Then, Kevin saw a vague vision, a mind-flow, it was a distant memory from his past: During the siege of Tehran in the late 2020's, Kevin (who was serving as an active-duty soldier) was in a desperate situation, where he and his brother-in-arms were stranded in an area surrounded by enemies; They fought hard nevertheless, and, unfortunately, only Kevin made it out alive in the end.

Kevin immersed himself in his mind-flow, recalling the words of his combat-training instructor when he was serving in the Navy SEAL: "Fighting is like composing, it's not about can you write the script, it's about can you hear the music. Are you hearing the music, Kevin?". The last calling of his name merged with Susan's voice (also calling his name) in Kevin's headset. Kevin silenced for a moment, then he looked up and whispered to himself: "Yes, I heard it."

As Levy dropped a rope from the broken glass ceiling and slid down the rope onto the second floor atrium like a paratrooper dropping to battleground from a helicopter, Kevin suddenly came back to his senses, seeing Rocklin approaching through a broken mirror lying on the floor. Powered by adrenaline, Kevin picked up a sharp piece of the broken mirror and cut through Rocklin's ankle as he (Rocklin) approached Kevin. With a loud war cry, Kevin pushed Rocklin down on the floor and reached his hands to seize control of Rocklin's rifle.

Rocklin struggled hard and fought back, his fists waved and hit on Kevin's face, specifically aiming for his eyes. Kevin's headset was accidentally removed during his fist fight with Rocklin and got smashed onto the floor. In the mean time, Levy was in a hurry to help Rocklin downstairs right after she finished Oliver.

Just when Levy was approaching the two guys fighting in the clothes shop, two other contestants (Moore & Smith) approached silently from the east wing. Susan tried to warn Kevin of the coming new danger, but his (Kevin's) headset had already been removed by Rocklin during their fist fight. Furthermore, at the moment, Kevin didn't know about Oliver's sudden death.

Moore came from a maintenance channel on the opposite side of the atrium. He was not yet in the line of sight of Kevin and Rocklin, but he had Levy's back in a clean shot. Moore took the shot, but missed, then Levy moved quickly like a cat and hid behind the boba cafe kitchen counter.

Moore got impatient and decided to push forward. However, Levy used Kevin's previous tactic and used Chan's dead body as a bait. Moore fell for it, he shot at Chan's dead body when Levy threw her (Chan's) head out. Levy caught this timing and headshotted Moore with uncanny precision.

As Moore fell down into his own blood, Kevin caught the timing of the chaos and grabbed the trigger of Rocklin's rifle. Bullets were fired randomly in auto mode, but Kevin managed to force the rifle to point at Levy's direction for the last one-third of the round of mag. The mag was emptied shortly afterwards, but Levy remained unharmed.

Meanwhile, Rocklin kicked Kevin's leg with his wounded ankle. Kevin fell back in even more severe pain, while Rocklin pulled out the broken piece of mirror from his wounded ankle. Then Rocklin tried to draw his pistol out to kill Kevin, but Kevin beat him to that and shot at Rocklin's pistol, which disarmed Rocklin from his firearms.

However, Kevin couldn't finish Rocklin, his (Kevin) pistol suddenly jammed as he aimed it at Rocklin's head. They both realized the daring situation, Rocklin rushed towards Kevin and kicked him back, expos-

ing him outside the barrier. Levy attempted to shoot Kevin, but Kevin dodged Levy's bullets swiftly and crawled into a dressing room behind him, with Rocklin following him.

When the bleeding Rocklin entered the dressing room to finish Kevin, he got kicked back against the wall, and Kevin slammed his face with an old chair in the dressing room. Kevin's moves temporarily disabled Rocklin's physical capability to fight him back, then Kevin took out his knife and pushed it towards Rocklin's neck. As Rocklin pushed against Kevin with all his strength, Kevin heard the stomping of Levy's footsteps closing in and verified it with the approaching camera drone signal shown on his wristband. So he quickly took his knife back, turned around and through it towards the door.

The knife pierced through Levy's throat just as she came into the door, while Kevin ran to hide behind the opened door in order to avoid Levy's attack. Levy was almost instantly killed by the knife cutting through her windpipe, but she still pushed the trigger of her rifle and randomly shot into the room. Those shots eventually killed Rocklin as well.

Kevin gasped hard after tackling down three fierce enemies in a row, he walked outside the dressing room, trembling. But the fight wasn't over yet, with an engine humming and another fierce roar, a mini terminal shuttle car crashed through the wall on Kevin's back. It was Smith, his shuttle car bumped Kevin away and he flew to the other side of the clothes shop.

Now, there's only two of them at the scene — Kevin Bundy and Geoffrey Smith, plus Susan Bing at the control room (having no idea what's going on at the moment). She could see them both on the monitor.

"Let's end this like gladiators." Smith said to Kevin with anger and determination, then he pulled out his knife instead of his firearms. Smith wanted to win over Kevin (and of course kill him as well to collect the

bounty) in an old-school style. Kevin agreed quietly by nodding his head and stared Smith with an raging glance. Smith then started to step forward, and so did Kevin in the mean time.

"Is this the end of Bundy?! Could Smith take out our wanted man?! Or the other way around?!" Rayner shouted out excitingly.

Contact! Smith first tried to hit Kevin in the face, but Kevin caught his waving fist and fought back. It was a hard slam that Kevin whipped on Smith's face! Smith fell back a bit but still standing. Kevin then put on his serious war face and did a sweep kick on Smith's legs. Smith fell on the floor but swiftly clamp Kevin with his legs. Smith got up and turn Kevin's body around.

Smith sat on Kevin, and started waving his iron fists (metaphorically, not literally made of metal) on Kevin's head. After a few painful and bloodshedding hits, Kevin caught a chance to kick Smith's balls.

"Ouch, that's the most painful thing a man can ever feel!" Rayner made a dirty joke.

Then Kevin reached upwards, climbed to the driver seat of the shuttle car and hit the gas panel. The shuttle car started moving, although not fast at all. Smith stilled struggled to hang on by holding onto both the shuttle car and Kevin's wounded left leg.

"The tide has turned and it's now in Kevin's favor!" Ed also shouted excitingly during the live show.

As Kevin dragged Smith out of the clothes shop by driving the shuttle car, Smith bit on Kevin's gunshot wound on his left leg, causing Kevin to scream like a wild horse on the loose. Out of the sudden pain, Kevin lost his sense of balance midway and steered the shuttle car off the fences on the atrium skybridge, with many pieces of debris followed behind them.

Kevin and Smith fell hard from the second floor skybridge at the central atrium, and they landed in a water pool within an indoor garden on the first floor of the central atrium. Kevin quickly got up from the fall, he grabbed a garden water hose from the bank of the pool and strangled it around Smith's neck while pushing Smith's head under the water with his (Kevin's) other hand.

Just when Kevin is about to strangle and drown Smith, their (Kevin & Susan's) last threat (hopefully) at airport that day, in the old indoor garden, a loud propeller humming noise came from outside the terminal building. Kevin looked up outside the window, an AH-64 Apache attack helicopter was aiming at them with two deadly machine guns, like a dozen of dark eyes staring at them with pure malevolence.

The presence of the Apache helicopter was totally unexpected, even for the crew of *The Daring Loot*. It was a external factor of distraction that was not supposed to be there at all.

The thing is, earlier that day, one of the pilots at an air force base on the island of Maui was drawn by the bounty placed upon Kevin & Susan, so he stole an Apache helicopter from his base and flew it to the island of O'ahu without any official authorization. He was so tempted by the money, and hence he began his bloodbath with machine guns rolling under rampage, in order to kill Kevin & Smith with overwhelming firepower[3].

The music was still echoing across the terminal building, but now suppressed by the even louder noise of the machine guns on the Apache helicopter. Meanwhile, Susan had left the control room and was on her way to help Kevin on site, but she had to stay hidden inside a stairwell after the machine guns started rolling.

[3] From the Apache pilot's view, he only saw two infrared humanoid figures on his monitor, so he naturally thought they were Kevin & Susan.

"What the heck!? An unexpected intruder just arrived out of nowhere!!! Presumably coming after the million-dollar bounty!" Jay reminded the world-wide audience about the daring situation.

Under the heavy rainfall of machine gun ammo, Kevin quickly rolled aside into the woods of the indoor garden, then crossed over the fences and hid behind the gap between the indoor garden and the atrium floor. However, Smith had one leg pinned beneath the shuttle car wreckage and he couldn't move away from the garden. Soon, he was vaporized and abolished by the Apache pilot.

Kevin kept his body as low as possible and walked unsteadily towards the north side of the terminal building, to get behind as many barriers as he can. Kevin eventually made it away from the Apache machine guns and met Susan in the same stairway she was hiding. They hugged together tightly, while Susan wept on Kevin's shoulder and told him about Oliver's death.

Kevin held his grief to himself, although he had anticipated this previously. In the mean time, a swarm of camera drones gathered outside the terminal building, high above in the sky, and captured the footage of the Apache pouring heavy firepower at the deserted terminal building, with pieces of debris scattering all over the place.

Moments later, again out of nowhere, another aircraft approached HNL from the east with stunning speed. It was a sixth-generation F-47 fighter jet commencing a high-speed low-altitude flyover! The F-47 fighter jet was sent by the air force to destroy the rogue Apache, so that they could keep the fun of this reality show.

Before the Apache pilot could react and make his defense (or escape), the ultra-fast F-47 launched an AIM-9X Sidewinder missile and hit the Apache helicopter right on target. Then the F-47 fighter jet flew over the terminal building in subsonic speed at an relative altitude of less than

only a dozen meters from the ground. Although the shockwave was subsonic, it was loud enough to rupture one's eardrum if the person is not far enough from its source.

The F-47 fighter jet stormed over the tarmac like a giant metallic eagle hunting in a hurricane, flipping over the remaining camera drones and furniture in the terminal building with its intense shockwave. The fly-over also shattered all the remaining glass windows on the southern side of the terminal building, causing many more pieces of debris to scatter into the terminal building at high-speed.

After getting hit by the missile, the shattered wreckage of the Apache helicopter crashed onto the deserted passenger airplanes docked at the jet bridges, which ignited the remaining fuels in those deserted airplanes and caused a massive explosion across the entire tarmac, forming a ravishing and blood-boiling scenery.

The camera drones captured the multi-angle footage of the F-47's attack on the Apache and the proceeding explosion, with a few camera drones got damaged and/or crashed for flying too low (comparing to the other camera drones that survived).

The exterior structure of the terminal building was severely damaged due to this explosion, but Kevin & Susan were physically unharmed (by the explosion). At this moment, the echoing music in the terminal building finally stopped due to large-scale destruction caused by the massive explosion.

Sunset at Honolulu Control Facility — Thursday, July 5th, 2046

With only humming noise in their ears, Kevin & Susan trembled through the burning debris and what's left of the smoking terminal building. After a long hard walk accompanied by frequent coughing, they finally returned to their truck in the maintenance tunnel. Fortunately, it was well hidden and remained operable.

Having defeated and surviving from four teams of bounty-hunters after a long thrilling day, Kevin & Susan drove to the Honolulu Control Facility (the air traffic control tower) and spent the night there. They did not have the chance to collect their lost weapons back, nor did they get to gather Oliver's body and his belongings.

After camping at the Honolulu Control Facility, Kevin & Susan looted the firearms and ammunition left in the weapons room at the control tower. Watching the scorching flames burn through the terminal building, Kevin & Susan had dinner in the air traffic control room at the top floor of the tower, and they mourned Oliver's death through next morning.

"What an exciting day! I believe this is the most thrilling episode in the history of *The Daring Loot*." Rayner concluded Day 5 as the highlight clips flashed through the big screen behind him.

The two co-hosts announced that the show's rating has peaked to an all-times best during this absolute climax in episode 5 of Season 5 of *The Daring Loot*.

And then Rayner also announced the launch of an additional random cash-draw of three million dollars in the spirit of celebrating the breaking of the record in the show's rating.

Chapter VI

The Last Card

Sunrise at Honolulu Control Facility — Friday, July 6th, 2046

It was sunrise on Day 6, as the burnt ashes drift away with the gentle sea breezes, the island seemed to be quieter than ever. No time for more grief and sorrow, Kevin & Susan must mobilize as the circle began shifting (towards the north this time) and shrinking again.

Kevin & Susan hopped onto their truck after finishing recharging under the morning sunlight. Kevin started the truck and began driving towards the Aloha Stadium at 99-500 Salt Lake Blvd, where the show host Rayner just announced to be the new (and also the last) duel site.

Over the quiet ruins of pearl harbor, sunken ships near the shore passed through their views. These ships were deliberately sunken during the naval blockade back in 2030. After a while of silence, Kevin & Susan arrived at the Aloha Stadium, where they saw the truck of another team already parked there.

Well, not exactly "parked" there, more like "crashed". The truck was crashed into the ticket office, with white smoke coming from its wrinkled front hood.

"Looks like someone beat us to here." Susan said peacefully, no longer with fear after the airport battle on Day 5.

"What the hell...?" Kevin approached the truck to get a closer look inside. A dying person lied on the back seat. It was F. Barone.

Surprisingly, although exhibiting some obvious symptoms, contestant F. Barone (who got bitten by a zombie at HNL on Day 5) is still alive and still hasn't completely zombified yet after exceeding the expected mutation time of the ice flu. The show's crew have sent multiple drones to monitor the zombification progress of the bitten contestant. However, it seems like his teammate has abandoned him.

By the morning on Day 6, Barone's skins have began to rot and grow disgusting pustules. With his last remaining reason and strength, Barone begged Kevin & Susan for a quick death. But Kevin couldn't do it, it just brought too many bad memories in his head.

Kevin ignored Barone's request and gently walked away, trying to forget about the half-human-half-zombie creature he just saw. Then, a loud and clear gunshot came through. Susan just finished Barone with her pistol, relieving him from the misery.

Soon after, Kevin & Susan entered the main structure of the Aloha Stadium, carefully looking for traces of Barone's teammate Z. Clebsch. Eventually, they made it to the top-floor stands for a better view.

At the center of the football field, stands the TCD, curling its fingers and signaling them to come closer. However, Kevin & Susan was in no mood of participating in the Champion Duel again. The TCD kept signaling them to duel, and Kevin just gave it the finger out of impatience.

"We've already beaten you once, sucker!" Kevin added, shouting to the TCD. Then they (Kevin & Susan) put down their gears on the chairs next to them and started making lunch. They didn't know that Clebsch was just resting in a suite beneath their floor, and he overheard Kevin's yelling.

Clebsch gathered his weapons and quietly went upstairs, while Kevin was checking his wounded leg for infections. Still in pain after the self-surgery removing the rifle bullet last night, Kevin & Susan haven't recovered their full strength yet and they were certainly not expecting another combat. Yet, things did not go their way.

"K, there's a drone circling in the building." Susan told Kevin about the unusual drone signal that she picked up on her wristband. In the hologram display, a blinking red dot (the drone's signal) seemed to be approaching the top-floor stand entrance above them through the same stairwell they went through earlier.

All of a sudden, just when Kevin & Susan were tracking the unusual drone signal, Clebsch ambushed them from their behind. Fortunate for them, Clebsch was a noob at shooting. His random strafe hit the seats and their portable stove. Bullets scraping off the moss and stains on the seats, while boiling hot soup painted over the floor.

Meanwhile, the production crew of *The Daring Loot* started airing BnB's latest battle both on live television and online. The video feed cut to a camera drone hovering high above the stands, capturing the two engaging parties on opposite sides of its view.

In the live feed, Kevin & Susan quickly lied down on the floor after hearing the gun shots from their behind. Facing each other with a serious face, Kevin & Susan were desperately brainstorming a good strategic plan to break through this dilemma.

"Clebsch is obviously outnumbered, but he has the high ground! While the BnB's are in a bad position for returning fire!" Rayner commented in the ABN studio.

Kevin stood up to return fire during the gap when Clebsch reloaded his weapon, but he failed to deal any physical damage on him. Out of the standoff, Susan had a sudden flash of inspiration. Susan asked Kevin to stall Clebsch as long as possible, while she reprogrammed her wristband and rewired the EM interference device they used earlier (on Day 4) to win the Champion Duel.

"Whatever you're doing, you better make it fast!" Kevin shouted to Susan, implying he's not gonna hold it much longer.

Moments later, Susan was done with her last-minute invention. She pulled out the old Starlink dish they found at Kevin's old apartment on Day 3, and pointed it upwards at the camera drone hovering above them. With some intricate manipulations, Susan hacked into the camera drone and took over its control!

"Bundy continued to draw attention, while Bing turned on her EMP device again!" Jay narrated on the live show.

Susan flew the camera drone she hacked closer to Clebsch bit by bit, while Kevin continued pushing upwards and creating distraction for Susan by returning fire towards Clebsch.

During a gap when Clebsch reloaded his rifle, Susan caught the short time window and dived the camera drone onto Clebsch's upper body like a kamikaze attack. The camera drone had a significant inertia that knocked over Clebsch's rifle from his arms, then Kevin seized the opportunity to storm through the entrance and killed Clebsch with a single shot on the head.

"Game over for Zachary Clebsch! And with 8 kill-shots during the season, Kevin & Susan are now the ultimate slayers in play!" Ed announced Kevin & Susan's victory as they took out another team of enemies.

"Now we have only six contestants of three teams left in the playground: Lee & Padrov; Bing & Bundy, aka the BnB's; And of course the Gordon siblings, who has been almost invisible throughout this season. My guess is that they'll probably all stay put for the rest of today, and then launch a final sprint towards the exfil tomorrow." Rayner explained the situation on the show.

After finishing Clebsch, Kevin & Susan made lunch again and regrouped during the afternoon. They moved their truck to a well-hidden location inside the stadium building, and spent the rest of that day drafting plans for the coming final day:

- Plan A: Formulate separate exfil strategies for each of the three possible exfil sites — the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard, the Pacific Fleet Submarine Museum, and the Ford Island Naval Base.

- Plan B: In case of missing the exfil deadline due to uncontrollable factors, flee from the island by piloting one of the old aircraft left in the Ford Island Airfield.

To make sure Plan B works so that it guarantees their successful retreat (alive) from the island whatsoever, Kevin & Susan used their one-time supply card and called for $10000 worth of aviation fuel, hoping that the show's crew will still deliver their order at the airfield even after them being wanted by the DoD.

"Similar to previous seasons, Day 6 is still boring like hell, as the remaining contestants prepare for the final battle of exfil tomorrow morning." Rayner tried to enlighten the mood for the audience as the island returned to a temporary period of peace.

"That's right, we now have three possible exfil sites for you and the remaining contestants to place the bets. By 09:00 am tomorrow morning local time, that is 12:00 o'clock noon in Pacific Daylight Time, the three remaining teams, should they survive till then, will contend for the championship!" Jay picked up the line after Rayner.

"Given the big scene brought by the BnB's stunning performance yesterday, we are expecting a more remarkable and astonishing season finale than ever!" Ed picked up the line after Jay.

"Remember to tune in on time for the battle of your lifetime! See you all on exfil day!" Rayner continued with excitements in his voice and then ended the live show earlier than usual, filling the rest of their time-slot with highlight clips from previous episodes of this season.

Audience around the globe held their breath, waiting to witness the crowning of the new season champion(s).

Chapter VII

Skyfall

Sunrise at Aloha Stadium — Saturday, July 7th, 2046

"Ladies and gentlemen!!! Welcome back the *The Daring Loot*!!!" Rayner, Jay, and Ed launched the last episode (season finale) of Season 5 simultaneously, while Rayner also greeted the audience with his iconic voice and body language.

"Today...is the exfil day!!! Our exfil deadline is at noon local time. That means...in just three hours...maybe even less, the new season champions will rise from the three remaining teams. So let the final hunt begin!" Rayner again used his famous attention-grabbing pause strategy to stir the audience's emotions and trigger their curiosity.

The video feed cut to a camera drone hovering above the Ford Island bridge as the circle began to shrink and shift. Kevin & Susan stood on the sightseeing platform in the Aloha Stadium and observed the horizon with their binoculars.

"Exfil is on that island, we have to cross the bridge." Kevin said to Susan after seeing the exfil ferry and other smaller boats approaching the southern shore of the Ford Island, with his voice trembling but trying to cover his anxiety.

Soon, the situation became quite evident for everyone that the exfil site is at the Ford Island Naval Base. And there is no other route to the exfil site except the long cable-stayed bridge — the Ford Island bridge.

Kevin & Susan hopped onto their truck and mobilized quickly, hoping to safely cross the Ford Island bridge. Camera drones gathered above them to capture their moves from several different angles.

With the audience's hearts pounding, their wheels stepped onto the Ford Island bridge. Kevin was driving with the utmost caution, while Susan was watching their back for any dangerous followers.

The shadows of the bridge cables brushed across their faces, forecasting the dangers to come in the mysterious workings of fate. After crossing half of the bridge, a surprised shootout from their front suddenly ambushed Kevin & Susan and placed them in great danger.

Kevin & Susan quickly bent down below the dashboard to protect their heads as rifle bullets showered upon their front windshield. Out of the sudden panic, Kevin stomped on the brake paddle and steered the truck to their right-hand side.

After a drastic tail-swinging drift, their truck quickly came to a full stop next to the wreckage of an old school bus that flipped sideways, while Lee & Padrov continued pouring bullets on the left side of Kevin & Susan's truck.

Meanwhile, the camera drones clearly captured the footage of Lee & Padrov sneaking behind some vehicle wreckage at the second cable py-

lon of the Ford Island bridge. As a matter of fact, they (Lee & Padrov) have been waiting there since last (Day 6) night.

"Get out! Get off the truck now!" Kevin yelled as bullets banging on his side of the truck and flying through the long-broken windows. Susan quickly opened the door on her side and stumbled out of the truck with pieces of broken glass strangled in her hair.

After Susan got off the truck and moved aside to hide behind the school bus wreckage, Kevin quickly followed her to move away from their smoking truck that might explode any minute.

Kevin & Susan leaned against the school bus wreckage to catch a breath from the fright, they both looked battered and exhausted, yet another cruel but crucial battle awaits them.

Confronting the enemies and risk being killed on site? Or sneaking away and risk being caught when they land? Or stay put and risk being boxed in? The daring situation demands decisiveness instead of hesitation or thoughtful consideration. It's a truly tough choice for Kevin & Susan, but they have to make a decision quickly and act fast.

All eyes paid close attention to this thrilling bridge blockade, waiting for their next moves. Not just Kevin & Susan's next move, but also Lee & Padrov's next move.

"Will Lee & Padrov stay put? Or will they push forward to face Kevin & Susan directly? Or simply retreat and claim the first exfil? We shall find out soon!" Rayner asked rhetorically to raise the audience's attention and curiosity.

As the narrators spoke on the live show, Kevin reorganized himself and climbed onto one of the main stay cables of the bridge. The main stay cables are the out-most ones that have maintenance ladders on them.

Kevin climbed onto the main stay cable on the left side of the bridge, near the middle of the bridge section between the two cable pylons (where Kevin & Susan stopped and got off their truck). Meanwhile, Susan stayed put behind the school bus wreckage to draw hostile fire.

"Another bold move of the BnB's! They could easily get boxed in at that spot!" Jay commented.

"Nevertheless, they are not admitting defeat! Now Bundy climbs the bridge cable along the maintenance ladders, supposably to ambush the bridge blockers from above. Yet he seemed to have forgotten the fact that other contestants can track his every move through his wristband signal." Rayner added after Jay.

Kevin soon made it to half-way of the main cable, roughly 80 meters above the bridge deck (and about 100 meters from the sea level under the bridge). Kevin then peeked to his right-hand side with his weapons armed, and shot at Lee & Padrov, who were hiding behind some car wreckage at the end of the bridge. Kevin was still pretty far away from Lee & Padrov, so his shots didn't deal much damage to them.

"Contact! These folks are using their AR-15 as sniper rifles, engaging in long range for a passage to the island!" Ed commented as Lee also climbed onto the main stay cable on his side of the bridge.

"Lee is copying Bundy's move! Are they gonna meet on top of the cable pylon?! We've seen bridge blockades before in previous seasons, but we've never seen contestants climbing the bridge!" Rayner added after Ed.

After a few rounds of crossfire, Kevin finally hit Padrov in his leg. Not a very serious injury, but enough to keep Padrov from any sudden moves. However, at the moment, Lee was already half-way on his side of the main cable, and he intended to climb further up to ambush Kevin from the top of the cable pylon.

Kevin then noticed that Lee was missing as he continued to shoot at Padrov's barrier, so he (Kevin) continued to move upwards along the maintenance ladders in order to beat Lee to the top of the cable pylon.

Just when Kevin started climbing up again, Susan yelled out loud in their internal communication channel: "Incoming from our behind!!!"

Kevin immediately turned around to check the situation reported by Susan, and saw the Gordon siblings rushing towards them (Kevin & Susan) in their (the Gordon siblings') almost brand-new truck.

"And here comes the Gordon siblings! They've been hiding from combat all season long, now they are finally making an appearance in the final sprint! Are they gonna boxed the BnB's from behind or just head straight to the exfil?!" Rayner continued narrating excitingly.

The Gordon siblings shot at Kevin & Susan like maniacs as they approached from their (Kevin & Susan's) back. Kevin & Susan immediately returned fire at the Gordon siblings as soon as he saw them, but the Gordon siblings' incoming vehicle was moving so fast like a blitz and only a few shots actually hit the target.

"It's a wild three-dimensional shootout! Although still pretty far away....." Ed narrated.

Within a split second, Kevin's left arm was hit by one of the stray bullets shot by the Gordon brother. After a loud and wretched groan, Kevin lost his balance and slipped off from the main stay cable.

"But they still hit Bundy! Bundy got shot on his arm! And off he falls!" Rayner picked up the line after Ed. Audience around the globe all held their breath as Kevin fell from the main stay cable.

At the same moment, Lee & Padrov was also strafing the Gordon siblings from the end of the bridge, in attempt to stop them (the Gordon

siblings) from successfully passing through the bridge as well. As a result, Lee did not pay attention to the falling Kevin.

Fortunately, Kevin managed to hold onto the edge of the bridge deck after a scary fall from the main stay cable, while Susan immediately ran towards him as Kevin screamed during his fall.

Susan caught Kevin's injured left arm and desperately tried to pull him up with her full strength, but her rescue was soon interrupted by the Gordon siblings as they flit through Kevin & Susan with continued bullet shower.

Meanwhile, the Gordon siblings rushed pass Kevin & Susan's damaged truck and headed towards Lee & Padrov's bridge blockade with increasing speed. They accidentally hit Kevin & Susan's damaged truck when they passed, causing that truck to slowly slide towards the edge of the bridge deck since Kevin forgot to pull the handbrake when he stopped the truck in an emergency.

"The Gordon siblings stormed through the bridge, they hit BnB's truck and knocked them off the bridge!" Jay narrated excitingly.

Susan then lost her balance as well after getting bumped by their sliding truck and also fell off the edge of the bridge. Kevin tried to grab Susan with his injured left arm, but he didn't have enough strength for it due to the recent gunshot wound.

Afterwards, with the noise of a cargo plane passing above them, Kevin & Susan both fell from the edge of the bridge and dropped into the sea water underneath the bridge after a 20-meter free fall free-fall.

Not long after Kevin & Susan fell into the sparkling tropical ocean, their damaged truck also dropped into the sea water next to them, and the aviation fuel supply that Kevin & Susan ordered earlier was air-dropped to the deserted Ford Island Airfield.

"With both of them falling into the ocean, the odds of winning are drastically fading for the BnB's. Meanwhile the battle continues on the bridge!" Rayner added after Jay.

At the same moment, the Gordon siblings had a close encounter with Lee & Padrov. However, their blockade was not physically concrete in terms of the physical barriers on the bridge.

The Gordon siblings raged through Padrov's side and continued to rush directly towards the exfil site. Padrov couldn't have stopped them due to his injury brought by Kevin. Meanwhile, Lee returned his attention to the BnB's in the water.

The blood from Kevin's injured arm stained the sea water around them (Kevin & Susan) and made their movements somewhat traceable even when they were diving.

With shots fired from above them, Kevin & Susan immediately swam away from their sinking truck and kept their bodies under water in order to avoiding getting hit by the stray bullets from Lee.

The rifle bullets entered the water like little meteorites falling from outer space. Kevin & Susan continued to swim towards the center of the shadow casted by the bridge deck, they only took breath above the surface when it's absolutely necessary and kept themselves below the surface as long as they could.

"The Gordon siblings have successfully broke through Lee & Padrov's bridge blockade, and they are now heading straight towards the exfil site to claim the season champion. On the other side, Lee & Padrov are not giving up on the BnB's!" Ed commented again.

"Yeah, they seem to have given up the championship for the million-dollar bounty on the BnB's lives." Jay picked up the line after Ed.

The camera drones were still tracking Kevin & Susan's signals from above the sea. On the left-half screen of the live show, displays the infrared footage that captured Kevin & Susan swimming towards the island's shore in the shadow of the bridge deck.

And on the right-half screen of the live show, displays the close-up shot of the Gordon siblings holding the season champion's trophy[1] on the exfil ferry docked at the deserted Naval Base.

Meanwhile, Lee & Padrov started their truck and drove away from their blockade. They went off the bridge but did not drive towards the exfil site. Instead, they parked their truck on the shore bank directly under the end of the bridge, and started strafing the offshore sea water.

At the moment, Kevin & Susan was already close to the shoreline, but they had to get further away from the eastern shore and swim towards to the northwest of the island for a safer landing site.

Lee & Padrov didn't want to give up the fat bounty on Kevin & Susan's lives, but their time is limited. On the other hand, Kevin & Susan dropped their rifles and heavy armors into the ocean for better agility, but still kept their backpack holding the classified hard drive and the Starlink dish.

"Their ammo and time are running out, what will be Lee & Padrov's final moves?" Rayner commented as the time gets closer to the exfil deadline, while Lee & Padrov poured their last ammo into the ocean.

"With the BnB's losing their firearms and heavy suit, the bridge blockers got no hits after all. It seems like the BnB's are skilled divers, or perhaps Lee & Padrov are not very good shooters." Rayner added after Lee & Padrov ran out of their ammo and finally decided to head for a timely exfil.

[1] See Figure VII.2.

Clock was ticking, and the hour hand finally pointed at 12. "It's noon now and the exfil is officially closed." Rayner announced the end of this season's game.

"Congratulations to the Gordon siblings for their championship!" Rayner sent his sincere congratulation to the winning team for successfully finishing the game and coming in first place.

"Also congrats Lee & Padrov for coming in second place. These two teams will get rewarded based on our usual dividend scale[2]. After that, we all know what's gonna happen next....." Jay and Ed added after Rayner simultaneously.

"As in the previous season finales, we have the clean-up bombing! Supported by the U.S. Air Force, three B-21 raiders are now preparing to take off at a nearby air base on the island of Maui. They will flatten the island of O'ahu in a just a couple of hours. This time window will be the last chance for the BnB's to escape the island, all on their own." Rayner picked up the line after Jay and Ed.

On the other side, Kevin & Susan made their landing on the northern side of the Ford Island immediately after they heard Rayner's life-threatening announcements on the live show, while the exfil ferry gradually departed the deserted Ford Island Naval Base.

Susan cleansed and patched up Kevin's gunshot wound after landing, then she put one of her arms around Kevin's shoulder and helped him walk. Although the exfil deadline has passed, Kevin & Susan give up on making their escape from the island.

Now the game is officially over, all camera drones gathered above Kevin & Susan and captured the last steps in their voyage towards freedom. "Such is the tenacity of life!" Rayner exclaimed for the BnB's.

[2] See Table I.1.

After a long and determined walk under the scorching tropical sun, Kevin & Susan entered the main hangar at the Ford Island Airfield, where an old F-15EX Eagle II[3] fighter jet rested under a military-grade dustproof fabric. The F-15EX was the only double-seated aircraft left in the hangar, and it's their only hope of escaping from the island.

The camera drones stared at Kevin & Susan, awaiting for their next move. People have guessed that they intend flee the island by piloting one of the old airplanes left at the Ford Island Airfield. However, most of the audience doubted if they could make any of those winged antiques actually power up.

Inside the hangar, Kevin climbed into the cockpit of the F-15EX and started checking those dusted buttons and meters. Meanwhile, Susan found an old fueling hose at the southwest corner of the hangar, and pulled in outside to connect with the airdropped fuel supply tank.

Surprisingly, the F-15EX was kept in good condition. As the fuels pumped in, Kevin powered up the main system of the jet and intentionally turned off its transponder. Because Kevin knew that if the transponder is turned on, other military aircraft will be able to remotely take control over Kevin & Susan's F-15EX.

"The fuels are out! Are we all filled?" Susan said to Kevin when the fuel supply tank drained out quickly.

"No, we got about 1200 gallons." Kevin said with a hint of disappointment.

"Is that not enough?" Susan asked.

"It's not much but enough to take us away from the island. Should be good for about an hour of flight time." Kevin explained.

[3]Later referred to as "F-15EX" for simplicity.

Soon after, the dashboard lit up, systems checked out, controls were nominal. Kevin & Susan climbed into the cockpit and started the engines after removing the wheel chocks and the engine covers.

With the rumbling noise of jet engines, air was vent out, creating great thrust power. Through the gate of the hangar, a steel falcon was reborn.

"You sure you can pilot this with your injuries?" Susan doubted.

"You got a better idea? Or do you wanna fly this thing?" Kevin asked rhetorically.

"Hang tight, this takeoff is gonna be much more violent than commercial jets." Kevin reminded Susan to strap in and get ready for a robust takeoff.

Watching the exfil ferry sail away from the island, Kevin pushed the throttle forward and pulled the control stick backwards. With increasingly loud engine noise, the F-15EX started to gain speed fast from its ultra high acceleration.

Meanwhile, three B-21 raiders have arrived at the east side of the island of O'ahu. Bomb bay doors opened and payloads were released. The B-21 raiders dropped cluster bombs and thermobaric bombs to the deserted ruins of the once prosperous tropical metropolis.

"Now looking back at the island of O'ahu, the B-21 raiders have initiated the bombardment over this season's playground! However, our stars of the season — the BnB's — are still not admitting defeat!" Rayner narrated excitingly.

Wheels up! Seeing the fireballs rose to the sky on the horizon, Kevin & Susan lifted off in their F-15EX. From a safe distance and altitude, the camera drones captured the footage of Kevin & Susan's heart-pounding final escape. Their images appeared on the live show again, with the

theme song of *The Daring Loot* sound off for the last time during this season.

Under the increasingly loud and approaching explosive noise, their jet took off from the Ford Island Airfield like the last flight from hell. Right after taking off, Kevin made a sharp turnaround to his left and piloted the F-15EX towards the south.

Shortly afterwards, the island of O'ahu, at least the areas that were included in the loot zone, were completely obliterated. The ruins turned into ashes and crumbles, and those zombies were mostly vaporized. Everything was just gone, burying the uncanny tragedies that once befell upon this island under several feet of dust and debris.

After some effort on the back seat, Susan have set up the old Starlink dish, connected it to the classified hard drive they kept through hardship, and started uploading the hard drive data to the public internet via satellites.

"The fun is over, send interception." Unfortunately for Kevin & Susan, the head of DoD have ordered two F-47 fighter jets to intercept them in mid-air. The message was also delivered to the ABN studio by the black-suited government liaison on site.

Moments later, from the same air base where the B-21 raiders took off, two F-47 fighter jets plunged to the sky. Within minutes, they caught up with Kevin & Susan's F-15EX heading southeast, flying by Kevin & Susan's sides and boxing the them in between.

"More friends from the air force have arrived at the scene, trying to intercept the BnB's stolen jet." Rayner continued narrating on the live show.

"Attention, unidentified aircraft, you are operating the property of the U.S. Air Force without authorization. Turn on your transponder imme-

diately and power down your satellite transmission device! Cooperate and surrender yourselves, or you will be fired upon!" The pilot of the F-47 leader hailed Kevin & Susan through the onboard radio, trying to persuade them to turn on their transponder so that the F-47 can remotely take control over the F-15EX.

"Go f**k yourself!" Kevin cursed the F-47 pilots in the radio and then he switched off the radio. Apparently, Kevin & Susan have rejected the air force's surrender proposal.

"30%, 35%, 40%, 45%....." The progress bar is pushing on Susan's end, indicating how much of the hard drive data has been uploaded to the public internet.

"Su, how are we doing with the upload?" Kevin asked.

"Almost a half!" Susan had to yell her response due to the loud noise of the jet engines.

Meanwhile, Susan hijacked the video feed of *The Daring Loot* with a retrofitted camera drone that they collected earlier in the game.

"Fellow Americans, look at what they did on this island! Here is the evidence of the DoD's top-secret experiment — deploying and testing biochemical weapons on innocent people. That's where the zombies came from, they were all living humans, until the weaponized virus turned them into undead!" Susan addressed the audience nationwide, revealing the egregious truth that some evil government officials desperately tried to cover and hide from the general public.

Soon, the contents they uploaded went viral on the internet. YouTube, X, Instagram, all the major social media platforms were flooded by the top-secret documents uncovered by Kevin & Susan.

Breaking news titled "***Resident Evil* COMES TRUE: REALITY SHOW CONTESTANTS UNCOVER DoD's OUTRAGEOUS CRIMES!**" interrupted the ongoing television programs and occupied TV screens around the world.

More and more coverage jammed the internet as Kevin & Susan kept uploading the rest of the files through satellites.

"Commander, do we have the permission to open fire?" The F-47 pilots asked their superior officer in the radio to confirm if they should shoot down Kevin & Susan's F-15EX.

"Paralyze them with EMP stingers[4]! Do not use live fire!" The head of DoD gave his order on the radio.

"Roger that." The F-47 pilots confirmed their order and pulled their F-47 to the side away from the F-15EX.

As Kevin saw the F-47's pulling away towards his back, he knew what's gonna happen next — an aerial combat.

"Sit tight!" Kevin warned Susan loudly, then he suddenly pushed the control stick to his front, and the F-15EX dived steeply in response. Moments later, Kevin pulled up the control stick and steered the F-15EX into the clouds.

"Locked on target. Fox 3, EMP stinger away." The F-47 pilots reported almost simultaneously as they launched two EMP stingers from under their wings.

The two EMP stingers headed straight towards Kevin & Susan with stunning speed, stroking white trails in the sunny blue sky, like spears

[4]A missile-like electromagnetic pulse weapon without explosive charges. It only delivers EMP damage to paralyze the enemy's electrical systems.

of death. Then they followed the F-15EX into the dense clouds in the tropical sky.

Warning sirens in the F-15EX kept beeping with increasing frequency as the EMP stingers get closer. Kevin performed a barrel roll with the F-15EX while releasing their only decoy flares as a countermeasure to the EMP stingers.

The decoy flares irradiated the water vapor around the F-15EX and formed a "ball-of-fire" sort of scene through the heavy clouds, which was captured by the camera drones filming from outside the clouds.

As the audience held their breath, thinking that Kevin & Susan's jet just got hit and exploded, the F-15EX stormed out from the clouds and suddenly climbed up high with a steep angle.

However, the decoy flares only took out one of the two EMP stingers, while the other one also stormed out from the clouds and followed right after their tail.

Under great pain from his injuries, Kevin did his best and tried every evasive maneuvers he could to get rid of the remaining EMP stinger. Yet he failed, the EMP stinger caught up from their left wing and pierced through the exterior hull of the F-15EX.

"80%, 85%, 90%, 95%....." The progress bar is getting closer and closer to the finish line.

"How's the upload going?" Kevin asked Susan again, but this time with more anxiety in his tone as the remaining EMP stinger approached their aircraft.

"Almost there.....Done!" Susan answered Kevin excitingly, right before the EMP stinger hit their F-15EX.

"Direct hit confirmed! I repeat, the EMP stinger is a direct hit!" The pilot of the F-47 leader reported to his wingman and superior officer in the radio.

"A direct hit by the EMP stinger! The BnB's jet lost all power and is falling towards the Pacific Ocean!" Rayner narrated excitingly again.

After the EMP stinger hit Kevin & Susan's F-15EX, it immediately discharged and crippled their entire aircraft by disabling the electrical systems and any electrical equipments on board.

Fortunately before everything went dark, Kevin & Susan successfully uploaded all the classified files to the internet and publicized this long-hidden conspiracy that the Department of Defense and the Military-Industrial Complex tried to bury deep for the past sixteen years.

As the F-15EX lost all power after getting hit by the EMP stinger, Kevin could only pilot the jet purely mechanically. He steered the control stick, leveled the aircraft, and gradually descended towards the Pacific Ocean.

"Brace for impact!" Kevin reminded Susan to hold her head against the back of his seat to protect herself from the imminent crash landing.

Under the scorching tropical sun, Kevin and Susan's F-15EX splashed down on the sparkling sea (international water). Their adventure on *The Daring Loot* officially ended at this very moment.

Although it seemed like a successful ditching, without major disintegration of their aircraft, Kevin and Susan's bodies were never found in the subsequent search and rescue.

With all contents uploaded and revealed their crimes to the public, the Department of Defense completely lost their face and suffered total humiliation.

The situation went way beyond their control, and the current head of the DoD were forced to resign from office under the pressure of public opinion.

The current head of the DoD was soon arrested after his resignation, along with his predecessor, who initiated **OPERATION FROST-FALL** and covered the Honolulu incident back in 2030.

Shortly afterwards, Kevin Bundy and Susan Bing were posthumously awarded the National Hero Medal by the President. The day of their escape was also announced as a national memorial day in recognition of their contributions and sacrifice.

Meanwhile, their whereabouts remained unknown to the public. Did they die after the crash landing? Or did they survive the crash and are still living in the dark at some corner of the world? Who knows.

Soon, the medias moved on. A year later, in the summer of 2047, a new season (Season 6) of *The Daring Loot* started airing. Rayner was still there, hosting this top-ranking reality show, with no knowledge of how Kevin & Susan ended at all.

The audience also moved on, placing their bets on the new contestants and praising the new star-players of the new season. And the world moved on as well, like it always have, as if nothing happened at all during that clearly rememberable summer of 2046.

THE END

Author's Note

This novel is an expanded story based on the original premise of a dream I had, with deeper characterization, tense action sequences, and a more layered conspiracy. It maintains a 16+ age-threshold with realistic violence, moral ambiguity, and high-stake survival tension.

Another motivation of this work of writing is that, with the rapid development of AI-generated contents, I fear that will there be a day when only actual bloodbath can catch more eyes than the phantoms fabricated by artificial intelligence.

The ending of the story was deliberately left ambiguous, allowing for potential sequels and readers' imagination. The entire narrative was driven by sensory details — the smell of decay, the cold weight of a rifle, the roaring sound of engines, etc — in order to immerse the readers in this bleak, adrenaline-fueled world of *The Daring Loot*.

Acknowledgment

I would like to send my sincere gratitude to my mother *Jingxia Liu* and my grandmother *Xiugai Zhao* for the support they provided me during the writing of this story.

Thanks to my mother's advice, I decided not to let Susan die in Chapter 5 since she agreed to play the part of Susan in a potential AI-visualization of this novel. In addition, extending from her previous suggestions, I introduced the character of Oliver and left an ambiguous ending for possible sequels.

Also, thank you (*all readers*) so much for reading this fictional narrative of mine, no matter how much of it you've made through.

I realize that I am an undertrained and inexperienced writer. Nevertheless, I've tried my best to output the many ideas in my head in textual format. Again, as stated in the copyright page, please feel free to email me at `twu0261@gmail.com` if you have any any questions and/or suggestions regarding this book.

Sincerely
Tian Wu
June 2026

Appendix
(Visual Concept Designs)

Figure VII.1: Logo of the American Broadcast Network (ABN).

Figure VII.2: 1st-place gold trophy for Season 5 of *The Daring Loot*.

Figure VII.3: 2nd-place silver trophy for Season 5 of *The Daring Loot*.

Figure VII.4: 3rd-place bronze trophy for Season 5 of *The Daring Loot*.

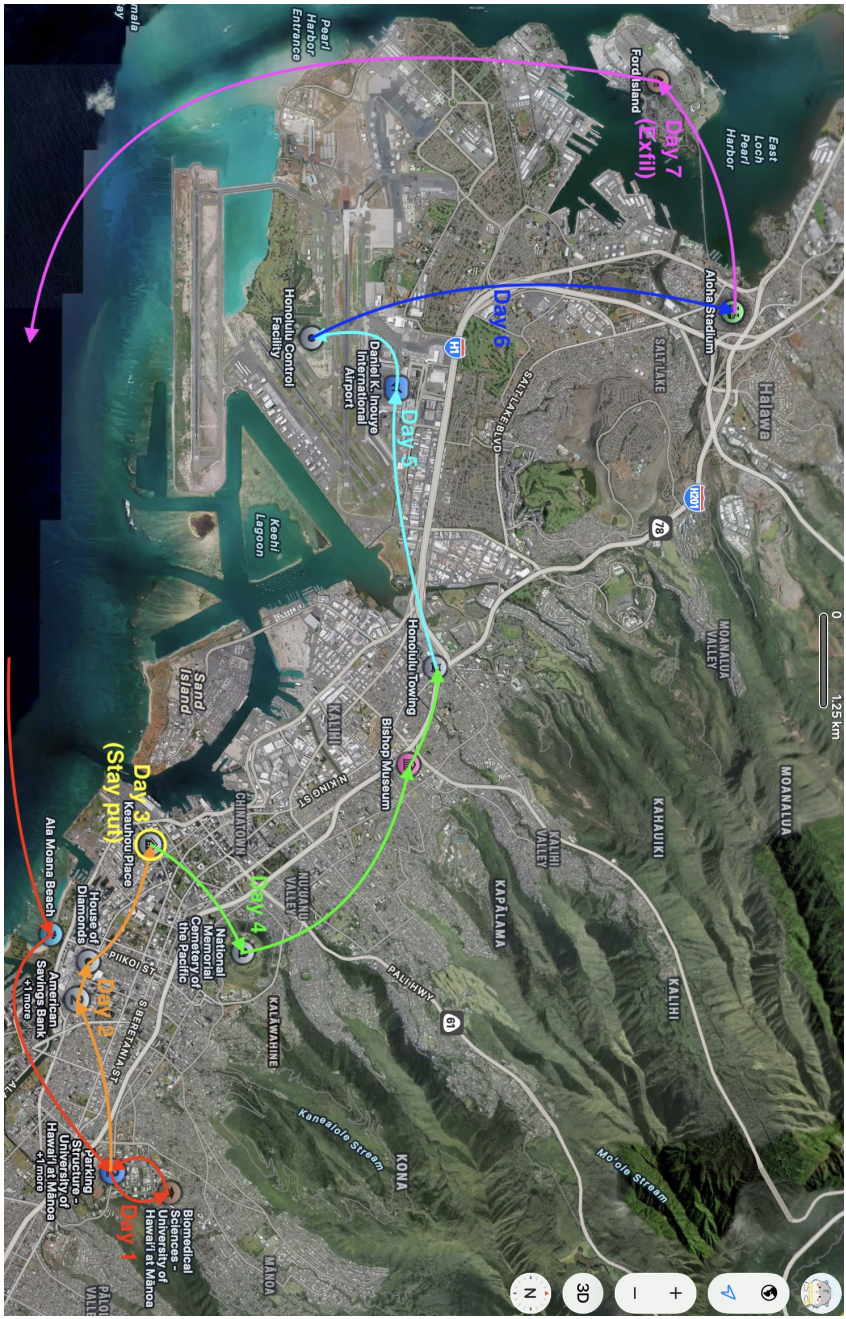

Figure VII.5: Map of the protagonists' route during *The Daring Loot*.

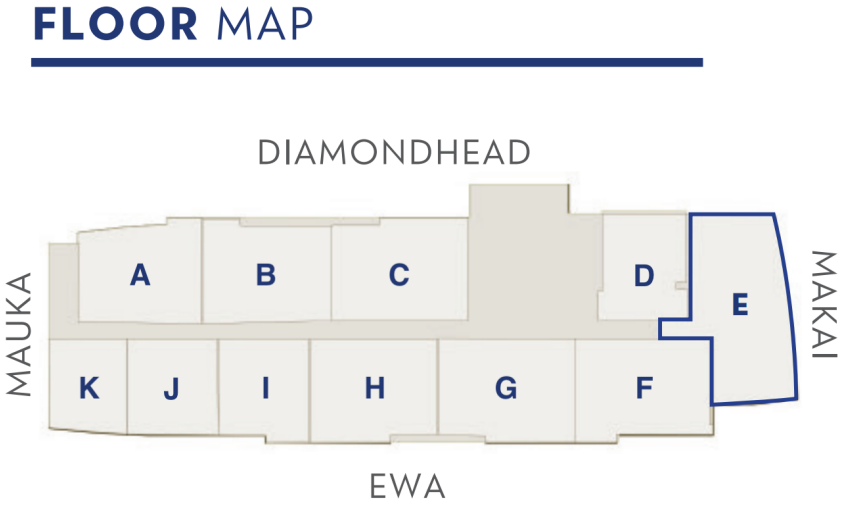

Figure VII.6: Floor plan of the ninth floor at the Keauhou Place Apartments.

Figure VII.7: The classified hard drive that the protagonists found at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa on Day 1.

Figure VII.8: Map of the Bishop Museum campus.

Team #	Contestants	Final Outcomes		Additional Remarks
1	T. Moore	Day 5	Killed at HNL	First kill-shot; Combat casualties
	G. Smith			
2	H. Lee	Day 7	Exfil success	2nd-place
	M. Padrov			
3	A. Gordon	Day 7	Exfil success	1st-place; Sibling YouTubers
	J. Gordon			
4	D. Kim	Day 5	Killed at HNL	Influencers; Combat casualties
	E. Batalha			
5	N. Cortes	Day 4	Killed at the Bishop Museum	Disqualified fugitives; Combat casualties
	V. Martinez			
6	S. Bing	Day 7	Missed exfil deadline	Duel winners; Wanted by DoD
	K. Bundy			
7	C. Ochoa	Day 5	Killed at HNL	Newlyweds; Combat casualties
	X. Chan			
8	B. Levy	Day 5	Killed at HNL	Ex-cons; Combat casualties
	W. Rocklin			
9	F. Barone	Day 6	Killed at the Aloha Stadium	Combat casualties
	Z. Clebsch			
10	O. Swinton	Day 5	Killed at HNL	Combat casualty; Best buddies
	R. Louisville	Day 2	Killed by zombie bites	
11	P. Andrew	Day 2	Killed at a bank	First to get killed; Combat casualties
	U. Colvin			
12	Y. Kobayashi	Day 3	Killed at the Chinatown	Duel winner; Combat casualty
	L. Taylor		Killed at the Cemetery	Duel casualty

Table VII.1: Final outcomes and additional remarks of all contestants for Season 5 of *The Daring Loot*.